

JUST FLESH

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By the same author

Out of Dust (Thacker)

I Go West (Michael Joseph)

Oh! You English (Muller)

The Pulse of Oxford (Dent)

This book belongs to a London, of which so much is now destroyed, but the memory of those days still lingers and I, therefore, dedicate it gratefully to Keith Briant for his friendship, to Ellen for her love, to A. H. who is now married and to Stewart and Alva but for whom my outlook on life would not be complete.

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**“ The sigh of midnight trains in empty stations,
Silk stockings cast aside, dance invitations...”**

—*These Foolish Things.*

CHAPTER ONE

THERE was no haphazard breeding among the Sommervilles. Ronald Sommerville was quite sure of this. He sat in his arm-chair beside the fire, unrolling a scroll of parchment. In this, the genealogical tree, each new member of the family had been carefully entered. Every generation there was great rejoicing in the neighbourhood when the Lord had blessed their squire with a son.

There was one unfortunate insertion. In a mischievous mood of petty revenge, Ronald's younger brother, who was killed in action in the last year of the Great War, had inserted in red ink, the words: "Here Adam was born." What made it so aggravating to Ronald Sommerville was its appearance half-way down the direct line of descent. His brother was dead and Ronald had always been fond of him, but this Ronald never forgot nor forgave. The joke was so vicious.

Experts had been consulted with a view to remove this spurious writing, but they were all of

the opinion that it would leave its mark behind. Perhaps it was better that it should stand as a bad joke than appear an indiscretion that had been wiped away. A stain on the family tree! That would never do. Biting his lower lip Ronald mumbled to himself: "A flaw in breeding." That was Ronald's only explanation of his brother's behaviour, but remorse of conscience and respect for the dead made Ronald refrain from giving vent to his feelings. He curbed his anger and looked blankly at the fire. The fresh wood crackled and little sparks flew out of the grate as the flames flickered on the logs of wood. Nothing else disturbed the quiet of this gorgeous Sunday afternoon, cold though it was, yet fresh and stimulating to limbs which were free from gout and aches in their fifty-second year and which did not groan with his advancing age. Ronald's body had been well looked after. In his habits he was continent and abstained from excess. He was a symbol of the normal and the hall-mark of his period and bore with dignity the stamp of his breeding. Thoughtfully he sucked his unlit pipe. His wife, Claire, did not much care for the smell of tobacco, so he confined his smoking within the four walls of his study, contenting himself with sucking the mouthpiece in the living-room.

An endless expanse of space formed a girdle round the manor house, and the outside world seemed so far away to the inmates of Galford Park,

The green lawn had been well kept, and in the mornings little specks of dew glistened on the flakes of grass. The hedges along the walk had been immaculately groomed. Symmetrical in size they re-echoed every trait of the Sommervilles—their dislike for untidiness, their scrupulous adherence to discipline, their sense of ordered beauty. Further across the way, dividing this monotony from the wood and the thicket at the other end of the estate, was a little stream and it flowed fast by this oracle of man which whole generations of Sommervilles had spent their lives building up. This ancestral home, that stood out amid the pine and the birch, made a stately silhouette against the sky, and as the moon appeared on a clear night, it seemed as if God in His kindness had helped both man and nature within the gates of Galford Park. At least Ronald liked to think so. It was his great preoccupation in life that the Almighty was always on his side.

He lifted his gaze from the fire and looked at his daughter, Anne. She had stretched out her legs on the straight-backed chesterfield and was glancing at the current number of *Vogue*. The models of Schiaparelli, Patou, Molynoux fascinated her. There she lay, perfect in limb, elegant in repose, smooth in complexion, clean and well-kept, ready to be snatched up by a lover of pedigree women. Yes, Ronald was sure of the breeding of both his children. Nor had he made any mistake

about their education. John, his only son, was finishing at Oxford, and Anne knew her Shakespeare and had read the Letters of Queen Victoria. He wanted them—particularly John—to carry on where he would leave off. He had planned well ahead for them and at every stage of their lives he had dinned into them the purpose for which they had been created. Tradition was an obsession with Ronald and his children were aware of it. It was a condition precedent to being born a Somerville to do as those before had done and as those after must necessarily do.

Such is the first glimpse of this family of four, living in England in the early thirties. The year does not really matter, except that it was typical of the years before this war. It may even have extended beyond twelve calendar months. Nor can one vouch for the chronological order of events which took place in that year. Historically, this pack of events has been shuffled for convenience. All we know is that the tone and feeling of that England was predominantly conservative, and that the Labour movement had come and gone with a flutter—like a gentle breeze that blew for three solitary years. The pendulum had swung back. The tide had turned and on the crest of the wave had come the National Government. Those who did not turn with the tide were left to fret or to find themselves waiting for the ebb. No one had dreamt as yet of a second world war; no one

believed that in less than a decade a moron in uniform would brazenly tread upon the face of Europe and that his armies, like a herd of elephants, would trample upon the flower of manhood and that his vandalism would leave a scar upon the face of man. Somewhere in Paraguay they were disputing about frontiers, somewhere in China, somewhere in Abyssinia.....yes, dark clouds had gathered, but in England, in gracious, kindly England, they knew the sun would never set. Like the rock of Gibraltar it stood—cold, grey, emotionless, imperishable. England was like that and no hungry generations would tread it down.

So also it was difficult to say where exactly Galford Park was situated. Very probably it was not far from the smoke of London, but sufficient to preserve its distance from the metropolis, where Smiths figured in the registers of small hotels and where Mrs. Smiths were varying commodities. Where mongrels bred, pedigree dogs feared to tread.

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chaplain had delivered a little sermon on the fifth commandment. Honour thy father ! This John had always done. But now the urge from within called upon him to fulfil his duty to himself, to base his moral standards on a code of life in which he had faith, and on principles by which, in his opinion, conduct should be regulated. Whether orthodox and conventional society approved of this deviation from the beaten track, was of very little importance. He felt as so many other young men did, that this was the modern age and that it implied a break with the age before on some of its fundamental principles, but where one age ended and the other began no one really knew. Nevertheless, it was his first realization that whole centuries divided father and son, though in point of time there was only a difference of thirty years. He began to question what he had been brought up to believe as gospel truth. Blind faith gave place to muddled reasoning. John yawned again and did not think any more about it. Carefully he folded the letter, stamped and addressed it and left it on the table for his scout to post.

That afternoon was not conducive to work. He wandered about his room. Listlessly he paced it a few times. He thought of nothing in particular. Only the strange incongruity of that picture of the lunch with Diana Clinick kept popping up in his sub-conscious mind, and he pulled out from his shelf the album of records and

settled down to hear the music of Beethoven. Across the quad, from Ivan Kohla's room came the haunting melody of Cuban music. The vocal refrain was in some South American or Spanish farrago and the loud beats of tom-toms and the rattle-like shaking of gourds was in strange contrast to the music to which John had been accustomed. Although separated only by a quad these two conceptions of music were very much apart. The music of Beethoven had been tried and tested. It was so like the world of John and his father. That of the Cuban was the music of snatching pleasures with no thought nor care for the future. These two worlds would always clash and the spirit of the dead Beethoven would always want to sneer at the living Aspiazu. Aspiazu! Don Aspiazu! His was the music of clapping hands, the music for snaky hips. It was the sort of soulful music which reminded you of distant shores on which the waters of the Atlantic lapped, of the rustle of palm trees, which from their heights whispered some enchanted tale of love and romance, and of little mulatto girls with curly hair and brazen expressions, never really seen but always dreamt of. Sexy rhythm—it brought back memories of a low-down Paris "joint", a *boite* in the *rue Fontaine*—the loose-hipped negro who shook his body till it lit up in one flaming passion and the *cocotte* who danced so close that you had to nudge her for breakfast in the morning.

Soul and sex, this was the rumba—this mad rhythm—this aphrodisiac *in excelsis*—this pulsating palpitation—this melodious throbbing—this subtle adventure—this life—this casual affair. Get hot, it would say. Get hot, get hot!—it kept repeating in syncopation to the impulses of man and nature. Sometimes it led you to erotomania. Sometimes it just got you out of breath.

Yet nothing seemed to ruffle the Anglo-Saxon in John. A Sommerville, he merely chuckled to himself, for Oxford had made him so very tolerant.

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There was a loud knock at the door—a custom which in Oxford precedes the actual entry by the smallest fraction of a second.

“Come in. Hello, Arthur.”

Arthur Marsden burst in. He was at school with John. It was a public school too and Arthur was dreadfully conscious of it.

“What do you do with yourself these days?”, Arthur said, looking very concerned.

“Nothing very much.”

“Heading for a first?”

“Am I?”

“Or are you merely taking refuge in work?”

“Refuge Good God, why?”

With that Arthur Marsden helped himself to a cigarette, and looked across the quad. He picked

up a large brown volume on which in bold letters of gold was written : *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Arthur looked sceptically at it, for Arthur was, for all his public-school education, a Philistine.

"I bought the damned thing too," Arthur said, "was told there were spicy bits in it. But there is not enough spice in it for thirty shillings."

John could not help breaking out into a roar at Arthur's utter frankness. He could not conceive of people buying this classic for its spicy bits, though he knew a great many had referred to it as being 'all about Arabia.'

"You know, John," Arthur changed the subject, "I am getting a little scared about my work. Sometimes I think I know my stuff, and yet I don't seem to remember a thing I've read."

"Don't be so absurd."

"Ah, but I am not so fortunate as not to have to worry about the future. I shall have to work for my living, I'm afraid." As John made no reply, Arthur continued:

"It's all very well talking about the dignity of labour and all that. I wouldn't mind work if I didn't have to do it. It's the thought of being compelled to work that annoys me—to be locked up in a gruesome office in the City for six days in the week. I have been brought up in the country and cannot breathe in the smoke of London."

"Hooray", John exclaimed mock-heroically. "To think its rural England that keeps you away

from work ! Green pastures and the smell of hay ! I sometimes believe you are a Lloyd-Georgian run amok from the fold and now want to till the soil as you have never done. God ! How it gets me—this infernal talk about going back to the land, when all you mean is a week-end at Brighton. Well, get it off your chest. There's no shame in it. Come on, let's have some tea."

"No thanks. I must rush. I have some people looking in shortly."

"People ? "

"Yes, people. People. Not women. I leave that to budding authors and those who have the germ of great writing itching in the palm of their hand." Arthur had got something off his chest.

It was typical of Arthur. His remark referred to many things best left unsaid and to petty jealousies, which John had hoped Oxford would have helped to outgrow. They originated from their headmaster's prophecy—Arthur called it hallucination—that John Sommerville would one day do something worthy of his old tutor. Arthur had never liked that. And so the mention of this worn-out grievance caused the awkward pause. John did not press his invitation, nor did it matter to Arthur whether he did. Nevertheless, their good-byes were very cordial. They might some day become successful diplomats under the keen eye of a Foreign Secretary. It was too early to foretell. Their friendships, like those of all great

diplomats, gave no indication as to which way they would turn.

The music across the quad had quietened down and John's own machine had run through the Beethoven records.

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CHAPTER THREE

AT Galford Park, Anne was still looking at her Vogue. She had read most of the articles. She could never decide anything for herself. There were some creations which were tinged with the grace of the Orient, others with the subtle finesse of the West. Each time she bought a fashion paper, she took an oath she would not yield to temptation. Each time it had resulted in a new frock. But now she must be adamant and yet. . . .

Unable to turn it down on her own, she turned to her father. A man is not expected to turn from the complex problem of breeding to the utter confusion of dress without turning a hair, but Mr. Sommerville took an interest in all that Anne did. Even when he could not, he made her believe he did. His eyes appeared to concentrate on the picture—a lively creation of bits and pieces, and his head nodded though uncertain which way. Then in one spontaneous outburst, so naive in a man of his years, he said: "Very nice, very nice. You are sure to win the prize."

“Prize?”

“Oh! I thought it was a fancy dress or something.”

Anne didn't say anything. She liked her father too much to correct him on trifles like these. Ronald saw that his effort to say the right thing had failed. But he was not ashamed of his ignorance: “My dear, I know so little about these things.”

She looked at him as if it did not matter what he said. She loved him so.

It was now time for tea and Mrs. Sommerville, who had been resting upstairs, came down after her afternoon's gentle reading. She was so fond of thrillers, but her reading was in such small instalments that by the time she reached the end, the thrill had gone. Sometimes when the plot was particularly exciting, she felt tempted to skip over pages and glimpse at the end. By marriage a Sommerville, by subscription a member of the Times Book Club, she could not possibly do that. One thing would lead to another and soon she would be cheating at patience. Then where would she be?

“Tea ready, Claire?” Mr. Sommerville asked.

“It should be”, his wife replied with the precision of a woman of her years.

“I am so thirsty. The weather is so delightful; it gives me an appetite.”

“We'll have it right now, dear.”

She rang the bell. It was then that she noticed what Ronald had been looking at all the afternoon, but was too tactful to refer to it. She merely said: "I wonder whether John will be able to get away." "Don't see why he shouldn't."

"He's working so hard—and there's the Tatoo. I know he'd like to see that....and the King with his soldiers.

"Mother darling," Anne interrupted, "don't you think John has got over playing with toy soldiers and getting excited over them?"

"I remember the effect it had on me when Queen Victoria.."

"Yes, yes....Queen Victoria!" Anne sharply replied.

The voice of authority was then heard. It was at once a diplomatic gesture reconciling two conflicting points of view and a pronouncement on a vital question of policy laying down what was the law on all questions that affected the family. The voice, the tone, the manner were appropriately chosen to harmonize with the importance of the occasion. It was the voice of Ronald Sommerville.

"What mother means is that it is quite natural for John to get excited. So few countries have anything to get excited about these days. The Presidents of France change as often as the Guards do in England; those of America are in danger of being shot down even before they are elected. We have something to be proud of,

Anne. We've built up a great Empire around us—an Empire that stands for democracy—and the world is envious of us. The monarchy is for us the symbol of that stability. And if John did not feel excited when he saw all this—well, I'd be surprised and ashamed that any child of mine should close his heart to the one thing that is almost sacred to me."

"Yes, father."

Anne faltered and found her words with difficulty.

"But ", she ventured to continue, "to feel it is one thing, to express it, is sloppy. I mean.. "

"Sloppy! You must never use that word again for something so magnificent. If you have any patriotism in you, you must not wear it on the sleeve of your indifference."

Mrs. Sommerville felt the point had been very forcibly put and was content to remain silent. Ronald Sommerville looked more grave than the occasion demanded. In his heart he felt as if he was in the very presence of that majesty of which he had spoken. Or was he kneeling down before the King himself, taking a command or an honour, and was overwrought by the importance of it all? Somehow, Anne felt she had been unfairly beaten. She could not express her argument with any clarity. There was always something she ought to have said, which remained unsaid, and she could never muster sufficient courage to say "Bunk."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE evening was turning cold. The weather changed after the sun went down. Yet it was delightfully fresh. That night John dined with Daphne de Lamas. He had first met her at a party at Wadham. She was one of those women of leisure, who lived in London but sometimes graced Oxford with their presence. She was always well turned out. In her eyes, which were quite brown, there was a little-something-lurking-somewhere, one did not know quite what to make of. She dripped with sex and smelt of subtle perfume. Some men felt utterly crushed in her presence. Perhaps it was the French in her, though she was far too English to admit it, for her ambition in life did not go any further than a portrait by Lazlo. John knew the type of drawing-room beauty he was handling. He thought of his line of approach. Sloppiness would never pay; the obvious must never be suggested. And as the evening goes on, even the intellectual must gradually be eliminated. Thus he laid down a general line of campaign.

John's reading had made incursions into Napoleon and Foch. In his little battles with the other sex, he had adopted some of their tactics. Now he did so instinctively. From previous experience and his unfailing instinct in such affairs, he knew the greatest hope of success lay in disarming the person completely.

He decided to prepare the atmosphere. Environment and surroundings could make all the difference to a first dinner. He chose a quiet spot with a well stocked cellar and a reliable chef, for he knew his Oxford well—a great achievement. They had a sumptuous meal. It consisted of caviare, indifferently eaten with bits of thick toast and chased down by a glass of Vodka. An entrée followed. It was a foundation for a full red burgundy—a Clos de Vougeot 1924—whose hidden warmth brought out - - - . Coffee to follow, and a Napoleon in balloon glasses to finish the evening.

John's attitude throughout the meal was one of great respect, ladled out with spoonfuls of indifference. It began to worry Daphne that she did not make her usual devastating hit. She felt she should. John, on the other hand, was relying on sound principles. He was by upbringing a doctrinaire, yet he adapted old theories to suit new conditions. 'Feed the brute' now became 'Gorge the lady.' The basic idea was much the same.

Daphne lifted her brandy glass. Holding it at

the base she stirred the brandy well till the aroma came out. She closed her eyes, and as if in one supreme embrace, her lips seemed to suck the brandy out of glass itself, lingering on the edge of the rim long after each sip. Eyes opened stealthily. They looked at John, then looked down.

John saw all this. With a gentle sneer on his face he said : "You must have a very fascinating attitude towards life—if one can judge from the way you drink your brandy. Does it reflect your attitude to life or is it just an affectation ? "

There was no answer, for the morale of the enemy was broken. He looked into her eyes. She stared back for a while. Then she looked down, dubbed the end of a half-smoked cigarette, and said : "Let's go."

Without a murmur they strolled out into the night. By Port Meadow there is a little piece of the Thames, far from the stink of London. No embankment, no midnight loiterers. A narrow tow-path runs alongside all the way up to the Trout Inn. It is thickly covered with trees and is continually winding. It was somewhat dark, for the moon had been tucked away behind a passing cloud. The overhanging foliage allowed little light to pass through. They walked arm-in-arm, but as the darkness blackened, she gripped his arm tighter. She was the type that did not fear death, but was like a child in the dark. Perfect quiet prevailed, except for the sound of their own

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

ACAB was creeping down one of the small streets in Chelsea. As it approached No. 14 it pulled up with a jerk. St. John Caska, who liked nothing to disturb the even tenor of his artistic life, muttered general disapproval at the somewhat violent shaking the sudden stopping of the cab had caused. When the cab door was opened for him he stepped out. He tipped handsomely. He could afford to. He looked up at the new building that stood in front of him—a grotesque structure in red brick which called itself ultra-modern architecture. His manner was somewhat patronizing for he had always looked upon Chelsea as the home of prospective artists without prospects. He had made his mark in photography and sculpture, and established himself securely in the very heart of Mayfair where he could live and work without much discomfort and where the people who appreciated his work were the people who put their hands in their pockets and touched gold.

At No. 14, however, on the third floor there was no artist. It was a modern self-contained flat, smartly but simply decorated, whose leaseholder—Arthur Marsden—was a magnet in shipping and now he also dabbled in wireless and television. He had an inventive brain and was paid well for all his inventions.

St. John Caska had very graciously condescended to go to Arthur's party. They had met at a private dance the week before, and Arthur, with his flair for celebrities, had ventured to ask the great Caska. Caska had accepted and kept his promise.

As Caska came up the lift he could hear the music and the voices. He was one of the late arrivals. He stood before the door, adjusted the cape around his evening dress, took off his topper, ran his fingers through his hair, and rang the bell. The door was opened. In the thick clouds of smoke he could distinguish his host who took his hat and cloak. "I wondered whether you would come after all", Arthur said.

"I was only too delighted. Seems a jolly crowd."

When they went into the party room the smoke grew thicker, the voices louder, and the music yelled out above everything else. No one stopped their conversation as Caska entered. There was not the usual hush that preceded his entry in a party in Mayfair when word was passed round

that St. John Caska had arrived, for his name meant nothing in Chelsea—nothing to the people who could not afford his expensive art. Caska was a luxury.

“How large the world must be,” Caska thought, “that the distance of a two shilling cab fare could make all that difference.”

The first thing his host did for him was to get him a drink. Introductions were of minor importance. This was based on Arthur’s theory that drink helped people to introduce themselves to each other, but as Caska was a person of some distinction he did him the courtesy of taking him round to a few of his more select friends.

“I want you to meet my wife,” Arthur said as he caught hold of Daphne. “This, of course, is Mr. Caska.”

“Really!” Daphne naively exclaimed. She was one of the few who proved the exception to the rule that in Chelsea they did not know the work of Caska. But she was really not Chelsea at all. The years with Pen had made her shake off her mundane breeding and helped her to pass off as a woman of the world, though this effort to acquire the cosmopolitan had never got much further than the pseudo-Bohemian.

Caska, however, was very impressed with Daphne. He saw in her the making of a new model. But apart from being a mere commodity, which he could turn to use by converting her

features into a form and shape which would sell in the market, in which he was interested, he found her a very likable person. She seemed intensely feminine, which was so rare in the modern woman. Her clothes and the manner in which she carried herself, gave him some insight into that essentially feminine character. He could picture her in a large hat which curved all the way round, or in an inverted toque or a dunce's cap worn back to front. He liked her. He looked at those eyes of hers. They were very ordinary. Her hair was dark and had that blonde streak in it, but even that was natural, and she had done nothing to make it look otherwise. She did not affect any squareness of shoulders, nor did the waistline shoot up and down according to the frock she wore. Her body was not particularly sensual. Her mouth was unusually small, and her lips were only so-to-speak. In fact, Caska thought, she was beautiful. Men would admire her from the distance. The woman he saw appeared to be different from the Daphne John had known at Oxford or the Daphne that Arthur married.

Caska was, for a moment, embarrassed by her rather absurd exclamation—"Really!" It made him feel an imposter, but a sense of humour enabled him to take it as a compliment—a surprise at seeing so famous a sculptor mixing with ordinary people in Chelsea. Because he liked her from the very start she was rather at an advantage, for it

made him put the most liberal interpretation on whatever she said. She remarked about his evening clothes. ‘

“ I am afraid I have to dine out. I am sorry if I have done the wrong thing appearing in them.”

“ Not at all. You help to tone up the party,” she said with a sparkle in her eye.

Now, that could not have been a compliment, could it ? It was just Daphne, and he felt a strong urge to turn her over and spank her right there. But that would be too much, even for Chelsea, though he had always been told that one could do, and did, exactly as one felt in that rather unorthodox quarter in London. But he was not sure, and he waited for some one else to depart from the line of convention.

Caska talked a lot to Daphne. He did not seem interested in anyone else. He was able to gather from her conversation that she did nothing all day, except when she had to go out and do some shopping. She read a lot now but chiefly for amusement. She was sometimes taken out by her husband but he no longer amused her. She had no great urge to do anything in particular. One could see she was not quite happy, but nothing bored her. She loved humanity as a race of men and women to whom she was tolerant. She bore no one any grudge. She had no great passion, and what there was, had died in her. No unsatisfied loves. No suppressed desires. No

repression. She was what she appeared to be and she made no bones about it. She hated posing.

They sat down in a corner of the room far away from the intoxication of wine and women. There was no room on the settee for two, so the great Caska sat on the floor by her feet. The more he looked at her, the more he realized how very ordinary her looks and appearance were. And yet from among all the women he had met and known, this was the nearest approach he had ever seen to the ordinary woman. In his mind he began to model the clay. He was visualizing his next piece of sculpture.

He seemed so utterly quashed by the pettiness of his own greatness. He felt, as he always had, that success was futile always and his art meaningless, and that even his cloak was an affectation. He had portrayed the beautiful, the exotic, the grotesque, but these were merely the poses of life. His art was only a cult—a fashion which time would render out of date and which would fade soon after he had ceased to hold the imagination of his rich customers. He never touched life itself.

He looked at her in the manner of a tender youth embarrassed at the presence of a beautiful woman, though in reality it was a great man perplexed by the simplicity of the ordinary woman he had never met before. And he laid emphasis on that word "woman", for he was conscious of

her sex.

"Tell me", he faltered, "would you pose for me?"

"Pose for you," she replied, not the least bit excited or overwhelmed by his gesture. "I know how great an honour it would be, but you see I would be useless. I cannot pose."

He was getting all mixed up with this word 'pose.' Of course he knew she never posed in life and that her conduct and behaviour were always natural. Nor did he want them to be otherwise. He merely wished to copy the naturalness of expression which he had missed in other works, merely because it had been 'posed' for.

"I am sorry. I should not have said 'pose.' Will you let me take an image of you as you are?"

"But it is so ordinary. I could not be anything like what you want—what you always found in your other models and represented. It would be too much myself and that would be like a family portrait or a likeness. I would be so ashamed of it."

"It may sound very absurd, but you don't know what you can mean to me?"

"Don't be so melodramatic," she laughed, "I can't keep pace with it."

"No, I am being myself for a change—after a very long time—only I know how long I have been otherwise and I can't go on. The work I have

done has no life in it. It is clever, it sells. It appeals to a certain class who can afford it. It amuses them. It reveals a cynicism towards life—but it is a negative form of art. There is nothing constructive about it. It is only a bitter criticism of the age and of the men and women in it. It has no life—no soul. I know it—but it has never been my fault. The women I portrayed never had anything to give. Do you understand now? Don't laugh at me."

Daphne had listened to Caska with great attention. She had not laughed at all. In her own little way she regarded it as a conquest. She never used the word "spasm" now—she was too grown up for that. But she felt sorry for him.

"That is why I think you owe it to me," he continued.

"Rather a peculiar obligation, isn't it, Mr. Caska?"

"Why?"

"Doesn't it strike you that I may have other obligations. I am a married woman."

"A married woman," he replied, "but what difference does that make? I am not asking you to give anything you should be ashamed of giving."

She looked at him sitting there at her feet—a man pleading for his art, or was it his life, and she laughed at the irony of nature, and the somewhat ridiculous sense of humour of the gods that his

fate should appear to depend on so insignificant a person as herself—she whose husband was not even in love with her. She took his hand which was resting on the side of her chair, and looking away from his eyes, she said:

“You just want me to be the ordinary woman for your next work of art?”

“Yes—honestly,” he said in all innocence.

“What do you know what it is to be ordinary and to behave naturally?”

“Just as you are doing now.”

And she shook her head. “You want it to have soul in it, don’t you? You want it to be something you have loved to create—something that does not merely make you chuckle at the futility of life. You want it to be life itself. Well....?”

There was a peculiar gleam in her eyes. They had a look of great triumph in them. It was life itself.

“You understand so much, Mrs. Marsden.”

“Yes, Mr. Caska, I am so very ordinary but I am not ashamed of being ordinary.”

“I think I’ll like you—Daphne.”

“Really, Mr. Caska”, and she laughed a little.

Even Caska could not help smiling. His desire to spank her had by now subsided. He merely said: “I am still waiting for your answer.”

She did not answer him immediately. For a moment or two she looked blankly at him. No

one in the room was paying any attention to them. She made quite sure of that. And then, leaning over and in a soft undertone, she said: "You will be discreet—won't you?"

He kissed her hand softly. He could not have expressed his feelings otherwise. He got up from the floor.

Arthur Marsden, who had till now been meandering around from one circle of guests to another, came back to have a word with his most distinguished guest. "Have some more to drink, Mr. Caska?" he said, and then turning to her: "You have not looked after him, Daphne."

"Oh, no—she has," Caska replied.

"Sure you won't have another?" Arthur asked.

"I have had so much this evening. I am really feeling very happy. The drink was very good."

"I am so glad you like it. It is one of my own concoctions."

"You must give me the recipe some day."

"Sure I will."

"Well, it's been a very nice evening but I must go now."

"Oh," said Arthur, "surely not yet?"

"I am afraid I must."

"Is there another masterpiece in the offing?"

"No—not a masterpiece, but I am starting on something tomorrow."

"Who is she?" said Arthur picturing in his

footsteps. Only a gentle quivering of the leaves was heard. The silence and the dark exaggerated the tense atmosphere. They heard something stir—quite close to them. They kept on moving. It stirred again and from the bushes emerged the most piercing groan as of some living thing in great pain. He felt the grip around his arm tightening. He dared not say a word. They kept moving. Once more it yelled in pain. It sounded like the last few gasps before death of something struggling for life. They hurried on without a word, looking back once or twice to make sure they were not followed. In a breathless condition they reached the bridge. He asked Daphne whether she felt all right. He was sorry he had brought her there.

When John broke the silence, she was relieved. Although frightened she did not want to give herself away. Now that they were on the bridge, whatever danger there may have been was left far behind. There was a deep sigh of relief at the security it offered to these two, whom the wailing in the darkness had frightened out of their wits. Well might it have been called the Bridge of Sighs, except that these were sighs of relief. The moon peeped out of its cover to watch this drama of petty mortals. They—Daphne and John—had in turn stopped to look at this unspoilt beauty of nature, which neither man nor science could improve. The little stream rippled at their feet

mind a beautiful model."

"Just an ordinary woman."

"But that is hardly Caska-esque, if I might say so."

"Well, if it pleases you I will call it 'Life' and make it sound intriguing."

"Good."

Daphne had listened to these two men talk. It made her happy to have done something worth while to have helped someone to create life—an ambition of hers in which she had once so miserably failed.

She ventured to put in a word: "Will it be in bronze or marble, Mr. Caska?"

Caska smiled, and without the slightest effort said: "How would you like the soul of a woman portrayed?" And Daphne did not answer. Only when he shook hands to say good-bye, she whispered: "Till to-morrow" and Caska gently whispered: "I'll be waiting."

Then Caska said good-night to his host. As he went down the lift he thought of the morrow and of life—his new theme. In his heart it had already begun to take shape, but he was discreet, and to the cabman he said nothing more than the address to which he wished to be driven.



CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

LONDON. Leicester Square. And the lights of the Plaza Theatre were blazing red. A large Franco sign announced Geoffrey Durrant's new play and all London had flocked to see it.

What an audience it was! In the foyer, beautiful women had collected—women who looked passionate and probably were, women who appeared happily married but allowed stray philanderers to embrace them, women who looked intellectual, women who had nothing to distinguish them but their sex—women, women, women. Ermine, mink, chinchilla. Diamond bracelets and strings of pearls. Schiapiarelli, Patou, Molyneux in every shade and style and colour.

Men too—dressed immaculately—Antony Edens and Adolphe Menjous on a small scale, all smart, prim, proper, their shirt fronts beautifully starched, pressed and polished. Gardenias and red carnations. Important people, taken straight out of the social register of all the capitals of Europe and America, each name of news

value, each face worth a million dollars. Money never jingled in their pockets. They preferred to carry five-pound notes. Money never itched in the palm of their hand. They were always spending it.

That first night at the Plaza would flatter any dramatist's vanity. John saw it all from the distance, pushed hither and thither by a dirty-looking crowd of anxious people, always pushing to get so much as a glimpse of some celebrity. John and Phyllis had been robbed of all this glamour because of the unscrupulousness of one man. Today they should have sat on the top of the world, defying tradition, defying their generation that stood in its way. Today they were still like contemptibles—like the *harijans* of India—shunned and kept at a distance. They were like lepers whom clean men were afraid to touch. It was the way of the world, the unwritten law of the rich, the legacy of the poor.

The female ushers, the *mächen* in uniforms, showed the stall-ites in. First row of the stalls, second row, third and so on—all priced at two guineas. Peers of the realm, peeresses, film stars and racing celebrities, industrial magnates with their secretaries, politicians and statesmen, a sprinkling of royalty may be, and hundreds of unknown personalities all with or without a bank balance, all those who produced a ticket on which the number of their seat was stamped.

The bell rang and the lights grew dimmer. Soon they were extinct. The orchestra played an overture to settle the nerves of a restless and impatient audience. There was silence. A tense-ness filled the air. Slowly the heavy brocaded curtain was raised on the little backyard of the hostel, which was the setting of the first act. The characters spoke. The play began.

John was in the gods with Phyllis, high up in the heavens, looking down on the little beings he had created, those little men and women who spoke his words. The play had much improved in acting and the producer had added many fine touches to it. Phyllis sat rooted to her chair. It thrilled her to the core to see what John had written. But her mind was not at ease and constantly she would repeat to herself the words she had written on a piece of paper, days ago, the words which she would shout when Durrant came to take the bow.

"You thief," she kept repeating to herself, "this is not your play. I can prove it. I can prove it." She forgot the rest and so she kept repeating what she could remember. No one else noticed her fretting, her impatience to see Durrant on the stage. No one suspected this play was not the play of Geoffrey Durrant.

The curtain came down on the first act amidst a thunder of applause. The lights flashed and the auditorium went to quench its thirst in the bar.

Below him John could see, in the bright lights of the stalls, some faces he knew so well. There were a few surprises for him. Now he saw that bearded face that had accompanied him from Oxford—St. John Caska—and with him was Daphne, Daphne Marsden as she now was. How did that happen, John wondered. Yes, it had happened—the best thing that could have happened to the two of them. It was for them a first night too.

A little further sat Anne. She had come with some friends of hers—friends she had known since she was a little girl—friends whom John knew too, though not now. He saw his sister and his face lit up. He had missed her so, during the long days of his tramping over dirty London with the wind and the rain blowing into his aching body.

In the bar there was a silence that could be felt. No one had ventured to utter criticism. The play was beyond the standards of the West End. It had to be judged by itself, without comparison with any other. It stood apart from anything they had ever seen. So they preferred to wait—this sophisticated first-night crowd, whose high-handedness had broken so many a promising playwright. For once they were willing to see it through before making wild prophecies. Grimly they drank whiskies and double brandies. Insipid they looked, lost in the wilderness of their own amazement, for they had gone beyond their shallow depths. Blood was on their hands and

they found the crimson stain difficult to remove.

The second Act held the audience spell-bound, breathless, even ashamed. If it had done nothing else it had rekindled the spark of decency which their affectation had extinguished. Decency was, like morality, one of the virtues they felt embarrassed to confess. It was part of this wave of pre-war philosophy which had swept over the victorious nations of last war. They just could not lump it.

And so they moved into the third Act, and the final expiation before the curtain was lowered. There was not a murmur from the audience and even the sound of a pin-fall could have been heard. There were moments of silence, for they knew not what to do. Then it broke, this emotional outburst that had been pent up from the word 'go'. In the same little courtyard there lingered the same four men John once met, all dead—dead to the world around them, dead to those whose lives they had once fought to preserve, dead to the England they loved. To the audience of the Plaza they made strange conversation.

Never was applause more generously given. Curtain after curtain, the actors took their bow, in ones and twos and threes. There was more applause. Sitting in the gods John too was carried away. For a moment he had forgotten it was his play. He had sacrificed personal glory at the altar of humanity.

Little Phyllis—for she was a mere nothing amid all these great and gorgeous people—was still reciting to herself the words she had learnt. Her heart was beating faster. Durrant had not yet appeared. From the stalls there rose a cry that was echoed in every corner of the auditorium. Author! Author! Author! It grew in volume. Yet no one was seen to appear. But they were determined to have him there to cheer him on his greatest success. There were a few moments when nothing happened. Then the curtain rose again. In the foreground there stood the figure of Geoffrey Durrant, author, playwright, thief.

He was the idol of the evening, the hero, the one outstanding personality amongst an indifferent selection of celebrities. There he stood, a symbol of youth and success, and they applauded him. Amid the deafening cheers, Phyllis rose in her seat in the gods. She had got up to make her little speech, but the noise was too much and her voice was drowned in the applause and amid cries of "Sit down!" from those behind her. John woke up from his unconscious stupor to realize the meaning of her shouting. He pulled her down and in a pleading tone said: "Please Phyllis, just for my sake." And she kept quiet.

Durrant bowed once, twice, thrice. They still applauded. Then he came a step forward and raised his hand, asking for an opportunity to express his gratitude. Grudgingly they stopped

their wild enthusiasm and listened to what he had to say: "Ladies and Gentlemen," he was eventually heard to say, "I thank you for your most generous reception of the play you have just seen. Though my name has appeared as the author I only wish I could claim this play as mine. But I cannot. For that you will forgive me when I explain the circumstances under which it all happened. After the production of the *Mad Symphony* I found one day in my correspondence the anonymously written play you have witnessed today. The author, who even to me is still unknown, would not disclose the name. Days later there was a woman's voice on the telephone asking me whether I could do anything to have this play put on the stage. She refused to tell me who she was, and in spite of my efforts to convince her that it was impossible to put it on without knowing the identity of the author, she would not say who she was or who had written it. My agent whom I consulted would not look at it because he feared it was a stolen manuscript. Somehow I had faith in that voice over the telephone. Something inside of me told me there was a deep tragedy underlying this little episode, one might easily have forgotten. I, therefore, took it upon myself and ran the risk which, believe me, has caused me many restless nights. Nothing happened and today I feel as if I have done something in life, even if it is to lend my name to some-

one whom I am sure needed it badly. I would, therefore, ask you once again to forgive me. That is all."

Durrant finished and the audience was struck dumb by his revelation. In the silence that followed one voice was heard. It was, Durrant recognized, the same feminine voice he had heard over the telephone once before. "Here he is," she said, "here he is!" John leapt up from his chair and ran towards the exit, but two men laid hands on him and though he struggled, they gripped him firmly.

"It's great, man, it's great. Don't run away," one of the two men, who caught hold of John, said.

"All right." John answered, and meekly gave up the struggle.

The whole auditorium stood in their places. The stalls, the dress circle, the upper circle all looked up, while they escorted him downstairs. His head hanging down like a man who is ashamed of himself, John walked down the gangway, till they lifted him on to the stage.

Durrant shook John by both hands, though his heart bled at the sight of him. In the audience there was little to be heard. Only Anne could feel a tugging inside her heart and Daphne and Caska were full of joy. No one else knew this pathetic creature in shabby garments. No one else recognized him as John Sommerville.

And the curtain gently went down again.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

THE aftermath of great success is painful in retrospect. Its first taste is often bitter. John looked back and wondered whether the sacrifice was worth it. Before him was a pile of morning papers. The bold headlines stood out above everything else—"Sensation in West-End Theatre", "Anonymous author revealed", "John Sommerville." Critic after critic had broken out in loud praise of what was universally acknowledged as the greatest play of the year. The veil of mystery, which had been lifted, gave publicity to the play. Sophisticated Londoners were only just turning in their beds and when they awoke they would hear of this celebrity that had sprung overnight from obscurity to fame.

John Sommerville! That name was "news" once again. Mr. Baldon's words had come true. His prophecy was fulfilled. There was something uncanny about the wisdom of age. No doubt youth had triumphed, but only with the acquiescence of old age—those time-honoured and much

and the heavens sparkled with countless stars, whose brilliance was reflected in the waters below. Their hearts which had thumped with fear now beat faster. In one brief moment the whole purpose of life unfolded itself to these two, now clasping each other, because the rest of the world seemed so far away. They drew closer. They probably kissed.

This modern age is essentially sensuous. Cynicism is our only hold on it. John knew only too well that here on earth was flesh, sophistication and mortality. He knew that the heavens would be constantly laughing at his pettiness. He did not care. To him at that moment only one thing mattered—Victory! He called it victory because he had shattered her forces of defence. For they were only children—children who were playing in the dark. When that evening was over, he deposited his little captive on the last train to London and returned to his rooms. The spoils of victory he left for another day.

“Have you ever seen a whole army marching homewards after a glorious victory?” John wrote in his notebook that night. “Have you ever pictured the triumphant return of a victorious general? Have you ever tasted the sensuous beauty of nature, and expressed your joy on the lips of a strange woman? Have you ever drunk so fully of life that your head has reeled and your blood grown warmer with passion?”

respected critics whose pronouncements we accept as gospel truth. So John knew how much his success was at the mercy of others.

Of secondary importance to the world, though also on the front page was the announcement of his father's illness. It had crept into the news because of the enthusiasm of an enterprising journalist. He had associated Mr. Ronald Sommerville with the defence of the realm and it was deduced from this that his illness would have serious repercussions on British armament policy. John read this unwelcome piece of news. Whatever he may have done, he felt for the old man whose heart he had broken. But there was no regret in his face, no apology for his breaking the great tradition. On the contrary, John felt he had been unfairly robbed of an opportunity to go back to his father and tell him what was wrong with him and his generation. Now that chance seemed to have been lost. It would be flogging a dead horse, and something told John his father would not live very long.

Such is the inhuman nature of man's greed that John's undoubted success weakened the old man's condition. He would no longer have the satisfaction of seeing the prodigal return on bended knee. Youth had beaten him for the first and last time. It was too humiliating an experience for a man who had lived the last years of his life only to see himself pushed back into second place,

while the ungrateful generation, to which he had given birth, had triumphed. It was painful too for a man who had sacrificed his life for the cause of his country, and who had put his immense wealth at the disposal of the Empire he loved, to find that the cheap notoriety of a second-rate playwright had ousted him from his headline position. "This is the end," Ronald Sommerville said to himself as he read about his son. "This is the end," he kept repeating to himself.

The doctor had left the strictest orders that under no circumstances was he to have the slightest excitement and, of course, leaving his bed was out of the question. That morning, however, while the rest of the house were still excited about John, Mr. Sommerville crept out of his bed and left his home. No one had noticed him sneaking out. No one had any idea where he had gone.

Two hours later when Anne knocked at her father's room, she found there was no answer. She looked inside and found the sheets were ruffled and he had got out of bed. She called out to her mother and the whole house was in agitation, bewildered as they were at his inexplicable disappearance.

James brought the Rolls out and as Mrs. Sommerville was stepping into the car, she saw in the distance Ronald Sommerville at the end of the long drive, hobbling homeward, taking the gardener's hand because he could not walk on

his own.

She drove up and met him. She brought him back into the house. She put him to bed. He was looking very pale and tired and was complaining of pain in his left arm and the same numb feeling he had experienced before.

"Ronald," Mrs. Sommerville said, "why did you go out?" And he would not answer. "Ronald, Ronald, darling," she said "won't you speak to me?"

"Yes, Claire," he replied.

There was no one else in the room. Anne had left her parents alone, for she knew they wished it so.

"Tell me what happened."

"Claire—I went today to the temple of God. It was calm and peaceful and the little chapel looked more beautiful than ever. I only wish I had gone there more often. There was nobody around and at first I thought I was merely speaking to myself my innermost thoughts, but I had a conscious feeling there was someone near. I looked up but I was still alone. It must have been the presence of God I felt around me. In my prayer a new vision unfolded itself. In its presence I felt weak and powerless. It was a vision of triumphant youth. We have lived our life, Claire—and in spite of all we have gone through, we have not lived it in vain. Whatever I may have done, I have done in the firm belief

that what I was doing was right and honest by my children. Our time is over and the world has changed and there is no peace on earth for those like us who cling to the old order. That which we loved and respected is the butt of every joke of the generation which we ourselves brought into this earth. Honour—tradition—glory—don't mean a thing to them. They will never build empires. What we have achieved in our time they can never hope to achieve. We loved our country as they are not capable of loving. We respected, we worshipped, we honoured our parents. Today they laugh at us and our sentiments they call sloppy. I ask God what is it that we have done—you and I—that He should punish us with such children. In our lifetime we have given them all the best things in life. Even after us we have provided for them. They shall always have security. What more can they want ? ”

“ Yes, Ronald.” she replied. There were tears in her eyes. This woman had played both wife and mother and her little heart was torn in two because of the conflict of affections. Today she felt for the man with whom she had shared all the happiness in her life, and the man who had also been the cause of so much sorrow. She loved her husband. It was part of the terms of the contract of marriage to love, honour and obey him until death did them part. And death looked so near at hand. Grim death—that

transition from grey darkness to pitch black, that rotting of the human body, that dirty odour of decaying flesh. Death !

We have all seen dear ones die. We have seen those familiar features bloat and the dead skin break and black blood burst out of it. We have seen those eyes which once sparkled with the joys of life, bulge out of the sockets. All that was dear to us, we have seen end up in a worm's meal, or in the fashion of Prometheans thrown to the vultures, their dead carcasses torn to pieces. Yet we have done nothing. We can do nothing. We have taken refuge in the thought that somewhere perhaps in another world their souls shall rest, far from the pangs of an aching world—far from the groans of suffering people. This self-delusion we often call prayer. This philosophy of life we call religion. But the dead still remain dead and neither man nor science can stop the grey film that envelopes the body.

So Mrs. Sommerville felt as she looked at her ailing husband—for they too were once young, they too were once in love. They had felt the warm blood in their bodies. But it was all so long ago and life and love had long since chilled in them.

She gave him a dose of medicine, a stimulant for the heart, for he had strained himself and this exertion had done him little good. Then she left him to rest and went to Anne to ask her to fetch John from London. She knew he would come.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

ANNE had rushed up to town the same morning and gone straight to Durrant, whose address she obtained from the theatre. With him she called on John and by the afternoon the three of them had driven back to Galford Park, where Mrs. Sommerville was anxiously waiting at her husband's bedside. She rushed out as she heard the horn and she cried because she was so happy at the sight of her son. "My child, my child", she kept repeating and pressed his frail body to her aching heart. It seemed to relieve her pain. She kissed him once, twice, three times, because she could not express her feelings otherwise. Durrant was then introduced to Mrs. Sommerville and Anne took him into the study and gave him a drink, while Mrs. Sommerville took John into his father's room. She knocked at the door.

"Come in." a feeble voice answered from within.

"Ronald darling, John has come back. He has come back to see you." And she led John by the

hand to the bedside. The two men stared at each other. Youth had come face to face with old age.

"How are you, father?" John ventured and sat on the chair beside him. Mrs. Sommerville tactfully left the room.

"Nothing the matter with me. Just a little tired, that's all."

"I understand, father."

"You don't. You never did. You never will."

"Are you still very annoyed with me?"

"Yes." Ronald said very firmly.

"Would you rather I hadn't come?"

"It doesn't matter to me whether you come or go. I told you once before. You had the choice then. You have preferred to live life your own way regardless of the feelings of others. Have it your own way."

"But I have made good and proved that I was not insincere in what I said and felt."

"No, my son, this is only a passing triumph. That's why I hate to see it. I wanted you to fail in life, so that you would realize the gravity of your mistake, but luck seems to have been on your side. You may be lucky once, but you'll be back on the streets when your luck is out."

"Life is like that, isn't it?"

"You have made it so. You have refused what we, your elders, were prepared to give you—security. You have shunned it—you and your

generation. This modern age of yours is very ungrateful. You don't realize you owe a duty to others. You are all just pleasure-seekers. Cheap adventurers."

"Pleasures? Do you know what life is like outside? I haven't come to say I am sorry. I came because I now have a right to speak the truth. Have I sought pleasures? It makes me laugh, father. Yet I can't. Those pleasant senses are for ever numbed. I have cried so much. God! If you and your generation only knew what you have done to me and mine. You have killed the children you yourselves gave birth to. It is not just me—one solitary individual, but thousands and thousands of us. Yet is there one word of regret? No, you call us ungrateful! Yes, we are ungrateful sons."

Ronald did not say a word. He had closed his eyes and was listening patiently to this sudden unbridled outburst of his son. John drew his chair nearer. He coughed badly. He paused for breath. He collected his vague and scattered thoughts and burst out again. He had completely lost control. "You told me once I had no right to belittle tradition. You remember it, don't you? That Thursday night in the study. What right have you now to call me ungrateful? Just because I broke away from tradition to make a man of myself. You don't know what I have gone through. You were too busy financing

armament firms. You declined a peerage. Do you think I believed what you said to the press and the public—you who would have given anything to be included among the peers of the realm. You refused because you were too ashamed of your son."

John felt a choking feeling in his throat. He throttled his emotions. He could not look his father in the face. There was a black haze that seemed to blind his moist eyes. He looked blankly at the floor. His voice fell to a soft low pitch. Very slowly but deliberately the ugly scene unfolded itself. "You don't know to what depths you have made me sink. You don't know to what I have had to stoop in order to prove I meant what I said. You didn't believe me then. You thought I was looking for cheap publicity and glaring head-lines. I never got a head-line while your name was written all over the front page day after day. But it was written in my blood. With the blood of my whole generation. You might as well know it now. You don't know what it feels like to go without food for days and to walk the streets of London in the foulest of weather. Hungry. Panting. Chewing the tobacco from odd stumps rolled in mud which have been trodden upon and which are too small and damp to smoke. You said you wanted me to see life. Life! Life! Why, I have seen more. I know what it is to be dead and yet feel your heart

thump under your tattered clothes. A pallid phantom walking, stumbling—walking to the tune of a death march.”

John had come to the end of what he had to say. He took his father's hand and in a pleading tone, sobbing, because he had not the strength to control his emotions, said: “Don't call me ungrateful. It isn't fair.”

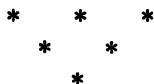
With this he broke down. Yet his father remained unmoved. Ronald's hand did not even respond to his warm and affectionate grasp. John continued: “If not now, someday perhaps, you will understand me. I am sorry I shouldn't have said all this. I forgot you were so ill.”

Nothing made any impression on the countenance of Ronald Sommerville. He did not seem to be interested at all. He looked as if he were bored and had fallen asleep. The sorrows of his son did not affect his placidity. He didn't care one jot. John waited a few moments for one word in answer. It did not come. Ronald Sommerville was dead.

That was the explanation the doctors gave when they came in and felt his pulse. Coronary thrombosis, they said. They knew nothing of what had passed between father and son. No one knew. No one would ever know. Why should they?

John stayed with his mother for a few days. He was a source of great comfort to her in her

For John, the evening with Daphne embodied all this in one glorious chapter.



bereavement. Durrant too had been persuaded to stay, though he required little persuasion. He was beginning to get fonder of Anne.

On the day of the funeral, John discussed with Durrant his future plans. Geoffrey had made many a gallant effort to induce John to stay where he belonged—with his mother and sister under the roof of Galford Park, but John was determined not to. While they stood in the churchyard after the others had left, Durrant once again appealed to him. "John, you have seen your father buried. As far as you are concerned your struggle is over. Why do you want to prolong it? Why do you want to bring misery to others?"

"No, Geoffrey, I never fought any individual. I loved my father as a father, as a man I knew ever since I was a little child, but as a symbol of the generation he stood for, I hated him. And that hatred still exists. No, Geoffrey, I must go my own way. I am leaving for town today. You stay on. Anne and mother would like you to."

John left for town that evening. Phyllis was waiting for him.



CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

IT no longer matters what the year is. Time may even have ceased to function. We only know that this is the modern age and we are the ungrateful children of it. We do not look back on our heritage, but always forward, visualizing the shape of things to come. Yet this modern life is a complicated pattern, a maze leading nowhere and euphemistically referred to as futuristic. It is a pretty mess of surrealism, a cesspool of sophisticated sufism. Intellectual bacteria! Poison gas! No connecting link, no sequence of thought. The world thinks this modern generation is mad. Perhaps it is. Perhaps it is only raw. Perhaps it has no mind. Perhaps it's just flesh.....

CHAPTER FIVE

B^y comparison the breakfast table of the Sommervilles was unromantic. The smell of coffee from the large cups filled the atmosphere, and the bacon had also a share in it. The dining room was dignified but could hardly be called intimate. A long, narrow table, the two ends of which could not communicate without shouting, made everything around appear so frigid. The high-backed chairs were not conducive to comfort. At the head sat Ronald Somerville, his wife on his right and Anne on the left. There was a place laid for John. It was a family custom that absent members must never be forgotten at the dinner table.

The morning post was miscellaneous, and, as always, was placed next to the head of the house. There was the letter from John. All eyes were turned to it. Ronald opened it, while the others ate in silence. This somewhat grim family picture had by its regularity assumed the character of a solemn ritual. His wife and daughter watched

the expression on Ronald's face. Seldom did it reveal the contents of the letter. Their curiosity made other conversation impossible. Page by page, as he finished, he passed it on to his wife and then to Anne. So the letter was read, and Mrs. Sommerville broke the silence:

"He is all right and well."

That didn't worry Anne so much as his break with Diana and the determined way in which he had spoken of it. Ronald thought of other things, which his wife and daughter had overlooked.

"I don't like his using words like 'Bolshie' ", he said.

"But it only means slaves, Ronald."

"Slavs, my dear, not slaves. I suppose it means the same thing, poor fools."

"Oh!" This exclamation might have meant anything, but Mrs. Sommerville meant nothing at all.

"No," Ronald continued, "his whole attitude has changed. I have been noticing it." Ronald pondered on his words. After a while, he gave some indication of what was worrying him: "He shouldn't have said all that about Diana's father."

"I don't suppose Diana will repeat it," said Anne trying to take her brother's side.

"That is not the point", Ronald said. "Does our honour depend on our actions or on other people's power of repetition?"

"It's the same thing, father."

"No, my dear."

The one thing that mattered to Anne was whether John could get away. She had missed him very much this time. From her early childhood she had looked up to John, because she had been told to. It had developed into a sort of hero-worship of its own accord. Fondly she thought of their little quarrels, then so fierce in their fury, now so absurdly childish in retrospect. Now they loved each other because they belonged to the same modern age. It bound them faster than ties of blood.

Generations are squalid insignificant bodies in the history of humanity. They differ only in point of time. Individuals are the living embodiments. That thought had often crossed Anne's mind, but she never dared to express it for fear of offending her father. She had always chosen the line of least resistance. She had by now trained herself to say 'Yes father' to anything on which Ronald Sommerville was emphatic.

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CHAPTER SIX

OXFORD on the Monday was brimful of activity. It had awakened from its sleep of the day before. John was one of a privileged few who were allowed to stay in college in the third year. He found the college more conducive to work than lodging houses, which the superciliousness of Oxford called 'digs.' Although there were more restrictions living in college, it was worth the sacrifice.

The walls of John's room seemed to re-echo the dark, disenchanted mysticism of the middle ages, and the more he took in of Oxford, the more it seemed to grip him. Yet it was not the stifling feeling of stuffiness that cramps one's style and stagnates one's energy. It rather gave a feeling of preservation and of security from the onslaught of the outer world. You could kneel down in it and pray, and feel that you were in the house of God; or you could hang bawdy pictures that masqueraded in the name of art, and turn it into a harlot's boudoir. It was entirely your own affair.

That morning the President of the Union came to see John. Geoffrey Durrant was one of the most popular young men at the University. His smile though broad was intriguing. He was very human. He did not speak in epigrams as is expected of those, who hold that office, by those who are always aspiring to it. Nor did he dash in and out of his friends' rooms exclaiming: "The situation in Abyssinia is fraught with much danger." That was left to the smaller fry.

Geoffrey Durrant was of a different type. He looked well-bred, though he never attempted to emphasize his breeding.

"Hello Sommerville. Sorry to butt in like this."

"Not at all. Come in."

"I shan't keep you very long."

"Perfectly all right."

"Well, I've got him for this Thursday," Durrant said.

"Great. How did you wangle it?"

"I don't know how, but the Foreign Secretary—the Right Honourable Gentleman—has promised to appear in the flesh."

"Good work."

Then in a mock-heroic manner, Durrant imitated the Foreign Secretary: "We have looked forward to hearing your voice—the voice of England—day after day, night after night."

John was amused at the versatility of this man, who never cared a damn about dignity and

mimicked everybody on the slightest provocation.

"What is he speaking on?", John then asked.

"I don't know. I think he is rather vague about it himself."

"Political—obviously."

"Yes. He'll either support *a* National Government or *the* National Government. He feels he ought to consult the Prime Minister before taking so decisive a step."

Durrant continued, changing his tone of voice: "I came to see you about the week after. You can speak this week if you like, but if I were you I shouldn't dabble in party politics."

"I couldn't in any case. I don't even know what our foreign policy stands for at the moment."

"Who does?—but I have another idea for you. What would you say to a debate on Tradition?"

"Tradition?"

John could not give an answer immediately.

"On which side would you expect me to speak?" he asked.

"Whichever you prefer. Though I should have thought that the son of Ronald Sommerville would always be on the side of tradition. But you can choose your side."

He waited for John's answer. John could not make up his mind. Ever since he had sat on the cross-benches for the debate on king and country, he had always shirked the issue. He could never face it. The clash between his own feelings and

those of his father, he had always managed to avoid. And so it had gone on. He turned round to Durrant and said: "You know, Durrant—you have the knack of cornering people at the point of the sword. They feel they cannot refuse, even when they are not particularly keen on accepting."

"Point of the sword?"

"Persuasion and tact can be as effective."

"Do I take that as an acceptance?"

"Yes—but I'll speak against it."

"Against Tradition?" Durrant was a little surprised.

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, of course you can always make a funny speech from either side of the House...."

"I don't intend to be funny at all. I am serious about it."

Durrant rose to the occasion. He fixed John with his piercing eyes and said: "I admire your courage even though your wisdom may have suffered on account of it."

His mission fulfilled, the President left. John began to realize that he had made a most momentous decision in his life at a moment which seemed most inopportune, without caring about the consequences and in the presence of a person who was not much more than a stranger. He was now beginning to feel he had acted a little hastily. He felt like rushing after Durrant and retracting

his consent to speak. With any other man John would have, but in those last words the gauntlet was flung and there was no alternative but to accept the challenge.

Ten days from now, the first Sommerville would turn in his grave, as John would turn over the pages of his notes on the despatch box of the Oxford Union. In ten days one individual would undo the work of a whole generation.

That afternoon there was a letter for John in the porter's lodge. It had been delivered by hand and was initialed G. D. The crest of the Oxford Union Society stood out boldly. It had incorporated the words '*Deus illuminatio mea*' and was marked 'URGENT'. The porter knew the significance of the note. He had been in that lodge long enough to know the contents of every letter by the feel of it. He could distinguish between good and bad news, between a bank draft and a solicitor's notice, between invitations and bills, between the girl-friend and the casual affair. However much you may deny it you could never fool him. He had not gone through life without reaping the fruits of his experience. His travel was extensive. Early in life he had joined the army and been shipped in a transport to India and Egypt. He had fought in France, and at the end of this hell, he took refuge among the young and the living, who passed by—'birds of passage, sir,' he would say, 'that's all what you gentlemen

are—birds of passage.’ His attitude towards these undergraduates was that of a kind, old man, always overlooking the misguided enthusiasm of youth. He never belittled his ‘young gentlemen’ and always made allowances for their superfluous energy.

For those for whom he had a particular regard, he would do almost anything. John was among the privileged few, to whom he played bank when broke and did other favours one would hardly have expected from this man with scars on his face and that look of stern austerity, which was a heritage of some of those who had survived the war. He brought the President’s letter up to John’s room.

“ Good afternoon, sir, thought may be you’d like to have this at once.”

“ Thank you, Chambers.”

“ That’s all right, Sir,”

The porter then leant over in a manner in which confidences are exchanged, and inquired whether it meant a speech at the Union. John smiled. He could not lie to Chambers.

“ But keep it to yourself, Chambers.”

Chambers felt very pleased with himself. Did’nt he tell Jim, the under-porter that Mr. John would get on fine ? Another forecast of his had come off. He raised his finger to his lips to signify great secrecy.

“ You might have a drink on me as you go down.”

The smile broadened.

"Yessur—can always do with a pint of bitter. Thank you, sir."

He leapt out of the room like a little child who had got his pennyworth of ice-cream as a reward for good behaviour. The door closed behind him and John opened the letter. It read ;

" Dear Sommerville,

Just a line about our conversation this morning. I shall not mention to anyone that you have promised to speak—not till Saturday when the notices go up. I'm doing this because I do not want you to hesitate in case you feel obliged to change your mind. In your case I would understand. I thought it only fair to let you know. The point of the sword no longer threatens !!

Of course, you'll dine with me before the debate if you decide to speak.

Yours sincerely,

Geoffrey Durrant."

If John was still uncertain, Durrant's letter gave him the courage of his conviction. Nothing could change his mind now. This arrangement also made it possible for him to go home for the week-end from Thursday evening to Sunday night. Three days would give him ample time to think over the subject and formulate his arguments. He went to his Dean to ask for the necessary permission, and later sent a telegram

home, saying: "ARRIVING THURSDAY KINDLY
SEND CAR MEET 5.55 PADDINGTON."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

IN the same compartment with John was a man with a small black beard. It was the sort of beard French diplomats wore when stepping out of the Quai d'Orsay—short, stubby, well-groomed. This stranger sat unconcernedly in one corner and looked foreign. His clothes though immaculate were hardly orthodox. Under a dark grey suit he wore a purple lamé shirt and an elaborate silk scarf in place of the tie. A dark-green pork-pie hat lay beside him and from behind the thin silk ribbon-band which encircled the crown, little brown feathers peeped out and shouted "Heil Vienna!" He was not a member of the University, nor did he in spite of his dress have anything to do with the O.U.D.S. He was above all that. From his clothes he appeared to be a genuine artist or a decadent or both. Whatever he was, there was something strange about him though his gestures and behaviour were quite normal. He was unmindful of the rest of the world and what it said or thought. Nothing worried him—

not even when middle-aged women stared at him with gaping mouths and little boys at street corners shouted: "Sissy." His clothes were deliberately deceptive, for he was no sissy and all the women he had known would tell you that.

The train puffed away past the little station of Radley on towards Reading. Till then, this strange occupant of John's compartment did nothing but look out of the window on to the open Berkshire country. His hands were crossed and he hardly moved except once or twice to arrange some papers in the large packet he carried with him. It was obvious his thoughts were far away and he cared little who was around. John had brought a copy of the *Isis* and was glancing at the "Passing Hour", reading tit-bits, spicy gossip and all the low-down on the big-wigs who adorned, every Wednesday, the paragraphs, the columns and even whole pages of this pungent organ of the undergraduate world. To read the *Isis* with understanding and appreciation was an accomplishment, for the best lines were always between the lines and even the proctors—staunch guardians of Oxford morals—could not delete what was not there. John's fidgeting with the pages did not disturb the complacency of his fellow passenger.

But when John had least expected, the stranger in the compartment awoke from his plaintive dreaming and exclaimed to himself quite loudly:

"Got it." Then he closed his eyes as if concentrating on an elusive figure which was escaping from his mind, bit his lower lip with determination and snapped his fingers in quick succession when the mental image was complete. When he looked up again, he became aware of John for the first time. He smiled in apology for his loud exclamation and added: "I am terribly sorry."

"Not at all," said John, who was taken too much by surprise to say anything else.

"No. It was absent-minded of me not to have noticed my fellow passengers," the stranger replied and began to feel in his pockets for something. Then he turned to John:

"Could you oblige me with a pencil?"

"Yes," John gallantly said, producing it from his pocket, "I think I can."

"Thanks, so much," he replied, "You see it is important. I've got to jot it down before I forget. It sometimes escapes me later."

But instead of making a note as one might have expected, he pulled out from his pocket a large sheet of art paper, stuck it down on a thin wooden board he carried with him and began to sketch the outline of an evening-gown on a lady without a face.

"Perhaps that explains a lot of things," John muttered to himself with a sigh.

When the sketch was finished it was long past Reading. The artist had taken great care over it

and the finished product was the sort of sketch which was featured by fashion magazines for the benefit of those hundreds of thousands of women, who never did know what to wear.

"Well", he said when he had finished, "that's that."

John nodded not being quite sure whether these random remarks were meant for him.

"Looks effeminate," the stranger continued, "but it's part of my living."

"Dress-designing?" asked John politely.

"Yes, there is a lot of money in it, if you can make the right sort of people believe in you."

"Must be exciting to create models," John said, but his manner was somewhat superior.

"Don't be snobbish, young man", the stranger abruptly retorted.

"There comes a time in life when you can't pick and choose your mode of living. You'll find that out for yourself."

"I am sorry", said John, hastily apologizing, "I didn't mean to be rude at all. I am so sorry I gave you that impression."

"That's all right. You're young. I say that not to be patronising, but because I have seen life. Fought my way up. All this affectation you see—my clothes, my appearance—were acquired later with success. I have worn things which even a tramp would be ashamed to carry on his back. Here's your pencil. Thanks."

John took the pencil in grim silence. For a moment he stared hard at his fellow passenger. He saw the hard-bitten expression on that bearded face. It was cynical, feelingless and betrayed no emotion whatsoever. Yet it was an interesting face. It aroused curiosity. "My name is John Sommerville. May I know yours?"

"Why, of course. It's St. John Caska", he replied in a very friendly tone.

"St. John Caska! Related to the famous artist?"

"Well. . . . I am that same person."

"So *you* are the man who makes those beautiful camera studies and sculps exotic women! But we have one of your heads. Father bought it at a private exhibition in Paris years ago. 1925, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I did show some of my work then. It was my first display. An American widow helped me. She financed it, though I have paid her back. It was selling the body to gain recognition for the soul. Which piece was it?"

"Tania. It's a lovely head," John replied.

"Yes, and so she was too. I met her in my early days of struggle. It was spring in Paris and she was very beautiful. A Russian emigrée. A child of the Revolution. An aristocrat, a victim of the Red Terror. A Jewess by blood. Later I heard she married a German and then Hitler came into power. She was killed in a street-riot,

shot by her husband's countrymen. A lovely head. I often wish I had never parted with it. Poor Tania."

"Well I can assure you it's been very well looked after."

"I am glad something of her still remains even though it is only her stone likeness."

"You must come over and see it sometime. We should be delighted."

"No. That would make me sad. But you can come to me. I have my studio in Grosvenor Mews. I live where I work. Life and work are to me inseparable. Come and see me when you like. I shall be glad. Here's my card."

He brought out a card from his pocket and gave it to John, who put it carefully away in his wallet.

"Why does a person like you take to dress-designing?"

"They pay me well. I sell my pictures and my stone-heads and I can live on that, but it is what I make out of sketching models and striking creations that keeps me on velvet. It's the way of the world. Modern Art!.. ha!" "Why" he continued after a while, "ten years ago I was not even known in London though I had lived most of my life there and could sketch just as well. Today they want to pay me to grin on tooth-paste advertisements and let my face appear on cards inside packets of cheap cigarettes. And why? Because the rich want me and my modern art."

Every year I do less work and charge more. Very soon I shall become scarce and when I am extinct, connoisseurs will look through little magnifying glasses to see if I am genuine."

John smiled, for he did not dare to laugh. Caska's cynicism was the outcome of pain which was so real. John looked out of the window and realized they had come to their journey's end. So many miles had slipped silently away, and the conversation had shortened the journey.

"We are nearly there. It's been so pleasant having someone interesting to talk to," John said reaching for his coat.

"I am equally glad", said Caska.

"Thank you so much."

"But what for?"

"For everything."

"Always welcome, my friend. And don't forget. Call any time you like. Ring me beforehand. Sometimes I am busy; sometimes I am out."

"I will."

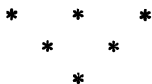
They crept into Paddington station. John collected his hat, his bag, his copy of the *Isis*. Caska waited for a porter.

"Well," said John, as the carriages came to a dead halt, "good bye."

"Good bye", said Caska. "By the way," he shouted as John got down, "what did you say your name was?"

"Sommerville. John Sommerville."

“Of course. Of course.” Yet there was no reason why it should be so.



CHAPTER EIGHT

A FEW minutes before the five-fifty rolled in, the family Rolls had pulled up alongside number nine platform. The Sommervilles were well stocked in cars. Besides this Phantom III they had a Daimler and a recently acquired Morris Ten which did odd jobs and their local shopping. The Rolls itself was brand new and the chromium looked very smart against the black background. There were two chauffeurs for the three cars. James who had been in their service for twenty years looked after the Rolls, and Charles the new man took charge of the other two, though on all matters of policy James liked to be consulted.

Anne had come to the station to meet her brother. Taken out of the surroundings of Galford Park, she was a very beautiful woman. Yes, a woman. She was twenty-one and only a year younger than John. She was tall, very tall, standing above everything that was small and mean. She was fair and parted her hair in the middle. Hers was the smile Leonardo da Vinci

had looked for and found in the Mona Lisa, though in her looks she was more attractive. But what beauty she had, was latent, hidden behind that Sommerville countenance, which overshadowed everything else.

Ronald Sommerville loved his daughter very much, but to him, Anne was not just a beautiful woman. She was a sort of second string in the stud, which was to produce the little Sommervillians of the future. That duty fell first on John and whoever he may take for his wife, but, should he fail, then it was to Anne and her future husband that Ronald would have to look to, to keep the blood of the Sommervilles flowing in the veins of little children. Therefore, Ronald was not primarily concerned with beauty in his daughter. That might even lead to sensuality, and what was the use of a daughter who was exotic if her offspring was illegitimate and she promiscuous. In the perfect stud, one strain must be matched with another. So too the blood of human beings must be carefully blended. Mrs. Sommerville was, therefore, entrusted with the responsibility of scrutinizing the men with whom Anne was to mix. It seemed as if the fond parent would one day bring Anne a panel of suitors and ask her to mark a cross against the man of her choice. Nor did Anne seem to mind. She was so much under the influence of her parents that she never had a chance of asserting what individuality she

had. All she did with any enthusiasm was to hunt every other day during winter, till she could no longer distinguish between men and horses. That was Anne Sommerville, not the woman she might have been. But unfold her garb of tradition, strip her of the foliage of convention, and she would reveal the most perfect form that God ever moulded or man set eyes upon.

The train crept in. Anxiously she looked out for her brother. It came to a standstill. Instinctively she made for the first-class carriages. She could not see him. Perhaps he had missed his train. John was never so careless. She looked again. The carriages were by now quite empty. As she walked frantically to and fro she felt someone grab hold of her arm from the back and kiss her on the neck.

“ John ” !

She turned round and kissed him. He took her by the arm and moved towards the car kissing her once, twice, three times on her left cheek. The Dean of his college, had he seen these two together, would hardly have believed that this beautiful woman was only a sister.

Old James was looking unusually smart in his new navy-blue uniform. He had been so long in their service that he had always regarded John and Anne as little children, whom he used to spank playfully in such quarters as little children are playfully spanked, and although he never

exercised this privilege now, he firmly believed he still retained the privilege.

“Good evening, Master John.”

He straightened himself a little more than usual, to make sure his new uniform would not pass unnoticed.

“Hello James.” John said shaking hands as he always did when he returned after any length of time. “You are looking very smart.”

This always pleased James very much though he pretended to be modest about it.

Anne and John got into the car. The dark blue rug was spread over them. The doors closed, the engine silently ticked over, and the Rolls purred out of Paddington Station.

One of the reasons why Anne made a point of meeting John at the station was to find out everything about the row between him and Diana and to warn him beforehand of the letter Ronald had received from Sir Gerald Clinick, Bart., Diana’s father. The hour and a half’s drive from Paddington was chiefly devoted to this. Anne was tactful the way she broached the subject. “Well what’s all this about you and Di ? ”

“Absolutely nothing at all.”

Anne looked hurt because he would not confide in her. She looked at him from the corner of her eye, and then turned to look out of the window of the car. She said nothing.

“Anne.”

She turned round.

"Anne, is there anything I have ever kept from you in all these years ? "

" Sorry, John, perhaps I was just a little too curious."

" You read my letter to dad ? "

" Yes."

" That is absolutely all that happened. You know it was never anything serious. I didn't mind going about with her, for she was pretty and well-dressed and I am crazy on dress in a woman. That's all very well in town when you are shooting round from the theatre to the Savoy. You like to show your woman off to the men who admire that pretty, pretty stuff, but you get tired of it when the novelty has worn off. And at lunch that day I began to feel ashamed of her as I would if a harlot called me by my Christian name in front of you. It was the same feeling of shame, only more embarrassing. I saw how superficial she was against the background of humanity as it really was. Those two men from Ruskin, unpolished as they were, had something more to show than the woman I had brought with me."

" Why did you ask her to that lunch ? "

" What else could I do ? "

Anne felt closer to her brother now than ever before. She had always had great faith in John and the part she had played in his life was to supply the shoulder to cry on. She listened

patiently to those things which he could never tell anyone else. She was like the heathen that knew no god but her own. To her, John was that god.

"You know what you said about her father and brother has upset dad quite a bit."

"What did he say?" John asked taking a deep breath and exhaling it with a 'pew.'

"You will probably have to write a letter of apology."

"I don't mind that so long as it doesn't mean Diana on my hands again."

Then with complete indifference she said in her characteristic manner: "I thought you'd like to know. That's all."

John chuckled at Anne's effort to play the woman of the world to whom these little incidents of everyday life meant nothing at all. To chafe her he always said: "Baby!" and she would affectionately retort: "Idiot."

And so the Rolls purred on through the slummy outskirts of London, through the open country moving at fifty as if it was gliding at ten. James fondled with the accelerator as the speed signals came on and off. He slowed down as he got to the gates of Galford Park and took the drive to the house with a dignity befitting the return of the son and heir. Alongside the front door of the Sommerville home it came to rest. James's judgment and the precision with which he parked the car was correct to the smallest fraction of an inch.

It was the result of years of practice in the service of the Sommervilles. During all those years he had studied every idiosyncrasy of his master to a point which was almost inhuman. So he had done the very first day he entered their service. So he would do now and always.

John got out of the car and helped Anne. Once he was back in the surroundings of Galford Park, he lost the confidence he had built up in himself. He became vague about everything. His modernism seemed a mere phase of adolescence, which he would outgrow, and as he entered the hall, the pictures of his dust-laden ancestors, hanging from the oak panels, whispered in reproach: 'John.' Blood was thicker than water and security remained a fascinating thing to allure human nature.

Mrs. Sommerville had come to the door to meet her son. She was always the dignified woman, whom God had created from one of the ribs of Ronald. So said the legend and Mrs. Sommerville herself was inclined to believe it. Her expression was always calm, and when she saw her son again, she felt her existence in this world had been justified. For she believed it was her mission in life—and Ronald had made it quite clear all through their married life—to be the mainstay of the family stud. But she was a woman and sometimes gave vent to her more human feelings and forgot to maintain the necessary distance

between parent and child.

"John," she delightedly exclaimed, "so nice to have you back again, my dear."

John kissed his mother on both cheeks.

From inside, Mr. Sommerville's voice could be heard: "Is that you, John?"

"Yes, father. I am here."

John made a move towards the study and his father, who was reading in a chair by the fire, got up to greet his son. There was a subdued atmosphere about that study. Its walls were oak-panelled and over the windows hung heavy dark-brown plush curtains. The settee, the chairs, the table, the carpet were all finished in deep brown—that rich deep brown which can be found on the complexion of a negro from the Oubanghi-Chari. A light brown cocker-spaniel that lazily crouched on the carpet and the green fern in the bronze vase were the only points of contrast in this symphony of brown. And Tania—her soft features chiselled in cold stone, her hair falling delicately over her curved shoulders. Tania who looked so pure and untouched by the world, so different from the girl who had once been Caska's model. Had Ronald been present in the railway compartment with John and his artist acquaintance, it is doubtful if Tania's head would still have adorned the study of Galford Park.

"Well, my boy," asked Ronald, patting his son benignly on the shoulder—a benediction which

indicated the great love he bore his son, "how do you feel ? "

" A little tired, that's all."

" Then you must rest these few days."

" But.. "

" No, my boy, you'll find the mind needs as much rest as the body. I would like you to get a first, on which you seem to have set your heart, but I wouldn't like to see you mentally crippled by it."

" Yes, father."

" Have a cigarette ? " He offered them to John from the large ivory box that came from the East.

John helped himself and glanced in the direction of the book that lay open on the chair. It often indicated the frame of mind in which his father was when there was no other outward sign.

" *Seven Pillars of Wisdom !*" John remarked with astonishment. " They made a packet out of it."

" It all comes in time."

" Yes, but...to think of having done a book whose first edition of fifty thousand was sold out in a week."

" You must not be such a materialist. A work like this is regarded as a classic. It's the best book on travel we have had for years, and it is the glory of having done something permanent in the world of travel that should really matter ! "

" Travel ? "—The word lingered on John's lips.

He had not heard that point of view at all.

But the old man continued: "Yes, haven't you read it? You should. It's interesting to read of thrilling experiences in the desert, how savage tribes fight and all that sort of thing. You must get a copy for yourself."

John's mind was far away. He could not grasp what his father said. This epic of the age, which he had read and re-read as if it was the holiest of Bibles, embodying not the religion of one sect of people but the suffering of all humanity, the torture of the soul, the realization of the body, the conquest of the mind, the pain, the anguish, the humiliation of discovering one's pettiness—this, the most sensuous piece of writing that had ever emanated from one single man—was to his father only a work of travel. John thought there was no greater sin than that the *Seven Pillars* were thrown to the rabble.

"Yes, father," John instinctively said, "I have already bought it."

"You must read it then."

"Yes, father."

It was nearly eight o'clock and Mrs. Sommerville and Anne were reading the evening paper in the living-room. Emma, who had been with the family ever since John could remember, announced that dinner was ready. A concession was made and John was allowed to appear in a tweed coat and slacks. Ronald sat at the head of the table.

immaculately dressed in his black velvet jacket and black tie and looked more than ever the country squire. He was a pleasantly greying man with sharp-cut features. His hair was well brushed and his moustache neatly trimmed. His countenance seemed perpetually in repose as if the troubles of the world were so far away and the sorrows and sufferings of people their own affair. They never affected his placidity. Each movement of his was a calculated gesture. He took his part in life so seriously that he was continually acting, though force of habit had now made him regard the actor and the part as one person.

Ronald asked Emma for a bottle of Jesuitengarten 1921. It indicated his joy at seeing his son again. This Rhine wine he regarded with almost the same reverence he had acquired for Chateau-Yquem. Ronald was a shrewd judge of wine and continually stocked his cellars with good vintages. He had not only good taste, but was the source of good taste in others. He did not care for champagnes, chiefly because he believed that the vineyards of France were ruined by the Great War, but those of the Rhine had greatly improved.

Yes, the Sommervilles had good taste. Their table was simple but correct in every detail. On highly polished oak were little doyleys of real lace. The glass was old Venetian, the silver old English. In a large flat bowl stemless camellias floated. It was the last word in table decoration, perfect in its

setting, its surroundings, even its people.

They had hardly finished the dessert when the front-door bell was heard. It was unusual at this hour of the night. A lull in the conversation was broken by Claire: "Who could that be? The post is already in?"

"Yes, my dear," Ronald nodded.

Emma, who had gone to the door came in with a telegram: "For Master John, sir." But she handed it to the head of the house, who gave it to John.

John did not know from whom this telegram could possibly have come. Had it been a letter he would have waited till after dinner, but a telegram might need an answer, so he opened it with his father's permission. He was rather surprised by the contents. He pulled himself together and with a smile on his face, which was forced, and an indifference, which was not natural, he said: "Arthur Marsden saying the meet has been arranged for Tuesday."

"Nice of him to have wired," said Anne.

John turned to Emma and said there was no reply. Then to Anne: "He probably thought I'd have to rush Monday."

He put the telegram in his pocket and apologized once more to his father.

"Not at all," said the old man, "one can't keep telegrams waiting. Why didn't he drop a line? You'd have got it first thing in the morning."

John did not answer that. The question was irrelevant for the telegram had really read: "If possible meet me lunch tomorrow Junior Beacon—Durrant." It had been forwarded to Galford Park by the college porter. When dinner was over, Claire and Anne retired, and John went to join his father in the study.

"Like a smoke, John?"

"I think I'll have one of mine."

And from his hip pocket John produced his gold cigarette case which had been given to him on his twenty-first, a lovely piece from Cartier with the bevelled edge done in platinum. It had his initials—J. S.

"Well, how is your work getting on?"

"Not badly—but there are only two terms before schools."

"That should not worry you. It should make you more confident. I had a letter from the Warden the other day. He was very sure of your success. I should really not tell you. But it will make you less uneasy."

"Yes, he is quite hopeful. I am not afraid of the exam. I want to get it over and be done with. But I am always afraid something might happen. That's all."

"You must not worry about things like that. Sometimes I can't understand what's come over you lately. I told mother I didn't like the tone of your letters these days. I want to have a long

talk with you before you go back."

"Have I done anything I shouldn't?"

"No, but your whole attitude is so unwholesome these days. I know you have your exam, so I have put it off for some time, but you must not take this callous and disrespectful attitude to life and to people who are your seniors by many years."

"I'm sorry about the Diana incident. Perhaps I should not have said that about her father but I just got carried away."

"I think you'd better write a note of apology. He wrote to me about it and I felt ashamed that my son should have said what you did of such an old friend of the family. One does not need to work to earn money. It is just as much a job to keep what you have already got."

"Yes, father."

"I think he will understand and let you take Diana out as before."

"I am not so sure I'm keen on taking Di out."

"That's your affair, though Diana is a very nice girl. Well-bred, very well-bred."

"Yes, father."

"In any case you must write to Sir Gerald tomorrow."

"Yes, father."

"Yes—and what happened to your...er...your Union debate?"

"The Foreign Secretary is speaking today and

I didn't like to speak on a political issue."

"Well, well. Fancy, he was with me at school and then at college. We still see a lot of each other in town. He's been of great use lately. In a way, I wish you had spoken. I'd have liked him to meet you."

"But I couldn't speak on foreign policy?"

"I suppose it's always wise to speak on a subject you know well, specially the first time..but he should have been in Geneva today. Shouldn't he?"

"Well, at the moment he is at the Union."

"Amazing how he finds time rushing here and there. What is the subject the week you are speaking?"

"Well...er..." John faltered. He dabbed the cigarette end in the ash tray. He knew it would require courage to break the subject to his father. Inside his breast-pocket was the telegram from Durrant. Perhaps Durrant had cancelled the debate. He may even have changed the subject. It would be better to wait till lunch the next day.

Mr. Sommerville persisted in his question. "What is the subject?" he repeated.

"I really couldn't say" John replied. "Nothing has been decided yet. But I'll only speak if I am convinced that I have something worth saying and that I have a point of view which is worth expressing."

"That's right. That's how I want you to be. I don't know whether I should say it now but

recently you have been moving too much with the wrong sort of people. It's all wrong when you start going about with Ruskin men and leave the company of your school-fellows. All this socialist affectation which has come over Oxford recently is nonsense. Never used to be like that in my time. We used to have a healthy atmosphere. And all my contemporaries are still healthy men with a healthy physique and a healthy mind. Of my personal friends not one has turned out a failure and we still hang together as we did the very first year at Oxford. One of them is Diana's father, that's why I resent your rudeness to him."

"Yes, father. I'll write that letter to Sir Gerald first thing tomorrow."

"That's right, son", he said, coming over and patting John on the shoulder. "That's the spirit I like to see in you. You see, John, your life is not your own. Mine was not either. We are all part of a system—a system which has been working successfully for years without interruption, and where I leave off you will have to carry on and after you, your son and so on till the species is sterile, which pray God it never will be. We are a very old family and we have existed because we have handed down a noble tradition from generation to generation. So you must have regard for my feelings—I, who have planned a future for you. Planned it years ago. Ever since the first

day you were born. Our family name, honour, tradition count for something in this world and you must realize that. You are of age now and responsible for what you say and do.* And you are a Sommerville, a child of mine. You must begin to feel as I do—as I was taught to do. That is my prayer for you, John, my constant prayer—that God may show you the wisdom of His ways.”

And with this the old man sank down in his chair in the manner of an orator exhausted after the last peroration. He mopped his brow, then lit his pipe and gazed at the fire. John did not say anything. He watched his father in silent admiration. The spectacle of this pleasantly greying man expressing with emotion the point of view of his generation, was touching in its un-mixed dignity. And yet the pathos of it! For all its emotionalism, its appeal to the intellect was conspicuous by its absence. Reason was beginning to play too great a part in John's life and every day undermined the link between him and the family—a link formed by natural love, which hung together because of instinct, not by conviction. At that moment the struggle within him was keenly contested. Now his filial love scored a point—now reason. Speak he could not. How could he, when he himself did not know which of the two would eventually prevail. This ding-dong business was nerve-racking. If only he could come to a decision.

And so without a word he got up and dug in his pocket for another cigarette and lit it. His father turned to him, and in a quiet tone said : " I am tired. Getting old you know. Latterly I have a peculiar feeling of exhaustion after the slightest strain. Can't keep up like I used to. So good night, my son. Go to bed now and God bless you."

" Good night, dad," was all that John could say.

An hour later John was pacing his bedroom. He pondered on his father's words. They made him restless. Once before he had known his father launch out into rhetoric though it was in the form of a letter. It happened in his first year at Oxford, when as a fresher, John had written to his father to ask whether he could join the October Club whose aim and object was to study the principles of communism and to appreciate intellectually the meaning of that political doctrine. John remembered that letter well. He had read it so often, he knew most of it by heart—" I detest the very word communism," it had begun, "for it has no respect for men or God. It is admittedly anti-God—anti-morality—anti everything that is pure and uplifting. It is the for-centuries- fore-told Anti-Christ. Full of filth and ungodliness, it is rotten to the core. Yes, I detest that ugly word. Capitalism may have many faults but Bolshevism is the last thing in hell to take its place. The only way to remedy this world-sickness due

to the conflict of Capital and Labour is the injection into human society of the love of God. But Bolshevism or Communism or call it anything else you like has no use for God. Its only God is lust and filth and rapine and murder and lies. And something inside of me rebels against it. Still, if you want to join the October Club, you may."

So John never joined the October Club. But it had been a great struggle—a sacrifice to give up his right to independence of thought merely because something within his father rebelled against that idea. The sentiments his father had expressed had long outlived the generation to which those sentiments belonged. Those were the days when the British people could not even accept the Russian Revolution as a historical fact. Instead they probed the moral aspect of it and resented the presence of the Soviet ambassador at the court of St. James' on those same 'moral' grounds. Since then they had sent their Ministers, their Secretaries of State to form non-aggression pacts with Soviet Russia. The politics of the world had changed, and Great Britain had lapped up the communist regime with the same zeal it once showed for Czarist Russia. The world was certainly changing and tradition had been flung overboard.

There was obviously some truth in what his father had said. And yet? Somehow, some-

where, something was wrong. How could he withdraw now? What would he tell Durrant? To change his mind now would be humiliating. And Geoffrey Durrant was the one person at Oxford whose opinion John respected. He remembered Monday morning. The conversation in his rooms and the generosity of the letter that followed. And now—to go back and say he did not have the courage to go through with it, doing what he really believed to be right, was to demean himself to a very low state indeed.

John looked out of the window. The night was black—no haunting symphonic melody in the air, no stately silhouette against the sky. Only the owl ventured out on a night like this. The cold wind crept stealthily through the open window, making the air crisp and fresh inside. John had not yet changed. He could not turn in until he had decided which course he would follow in life. This might easily turn out to be the parting of the ways. Which way would he choose? The beaten track—the road the Sommervilles had followed—was the road of tradition and of security. Divert from it and there was no knowing where he would end. Yet it was the road to freedom, the road which all young men must follow if they are to fulfil the promise of their generation. It was a road not yet explored. God knows what dangers the youthful pilgrim would encounter. Out of the wilderness some new land may appear and out

of the darkness a new vision may unfold itself.

John could picture the tense scene at the Union. Eleven hundred faces. The outbreak of applause. The President's smile. The notes of congratulation. But for John only the wind blew gentler, and the mist seemed to lift a little.

He grasped the sides of the window with his out-stretched hands. He inhaled the breath of new life. His fists were clenched, his eyes closed in reverence. It was the renaissance of decaying youth. Like the Bedouin on the desert sand, or the Moslem on his marble floor, he lifted his hands to God in the manner of a New Christ—crucified not by the terror of a Semite people but by the oppression of a generation of fathers. But all this anguish may well be in vain and, for all he knew, Durrant might easily have changed the subject. Yet even that would help him little, for it was the inner self that had rebelled and postponement of the debate would merely shelve the issue.



CHAPTER NINE

NOTHING unusual happened at Oxford that same night except that at the Union dinner one of the undergraduate speakers leant over and very confidentially asked the Foreign Secretary whether there was any truth in the rumour that the Prime Minister was balmy. And the Foreign Secretary denied the rumour on behalf of His Majesty's Government. It did, however, annoy him greatly to have continually to deny on behalf of his Government every rumour that sprang up in the places he visited.

A diplomat, he spoke with authority on every phase of English foreign policy. He had visited every capital in Europe and had been present at more historic occasions than he cared to remember. He had attested with his signature so many treaties in Europe. Yet his mind worked in a queer way its wonders to perform, for he was primarily a lawyer and had come to the Foreign Office quite by mistake. He never understood human nature and had not cared to study the temperament of

the diplomatic services with whom he had constantly to deal, so that in the handling of delicate matters he always took too rigid an attitude and came back from his conferences with as empty hands as he had gone to them.

An ex-President of the Union himself, the Foreign Secretary belonged to the generation that dominated the thought and opinion of Oxford towards the end of the nineteenth century. He was then a master of epigram, but years of training in the parliamentary school had altered his style. He was fully conscious of this change when he walked through the lobby into the debating hall of the union, packed as it was with the faces of the young who cheered him wildly. It was a convention of the Oxford Union that every visitor must be given his full share of applause—but always before he had made his speech.

The President led the way, a look of triumph on his face, for he had succeeded in drawing so important a speaker into debate. The distinguished visitor followed him and the long procession of white-tie and tails flowed majestically past towards the presidential chair.

The Foreign Secretary sat with the other speakers on the floor of the House while the President and the officers looked down from on high. How different it was from the House of Commons, he thought, as the Foreign Secretary looked round this crowded room, the scene of his

former triumphs and the training-ground of his parliamentary career. With years it had changed little and familiar faces peered out of dusty frames that hung indifferently from the patchy walls.

In cold marble stood the effigies of Gladstone, Salisbury, and the most noble Marquis of Curzon, and Birkenhead had joined them later. Birkenhead !—Lord Chancellor of England, whom he knew and once called by the more intimate name of 'F. E.' So dignified in dark brown, chiselled in bronze, isolated and yet holding his own against his compeers. The noble and the right honorable ex-President from Wadham !

And the Foreign Secretary pondered on his own record of events and wondered what stone or metal would immortalize his glory as Foreign Secretary in His Majesty's Government. His career was chequered, his policy shaky, his utterances vague, his achievements somewhat mediocre. In his political allegiance he had waived between Liberalism and the Conservative Party, till in his wanderings he had stumbled into the wilderness of a National Government, which was to be his final resting-place, and where he was sheltered and secluded from the turmoil of party politics in those cloistered ministerial cells, from which he could with equanimity wave his little flag of red, white, and blue and speak glibly of 'Country before Party.' Every morning as the sun peered through the heavy blinds of his

house in Grosvenor Square, he would imagine that the whole of England was waiting for him to arise, for the fate of Europe hung in the balance and depended on which side of the bed he got up. The variations and contradictions in the enunciation of English Foreign Policy during his regime could bear no other rational explanation.



CHAPTER TEN

DAPHNE had lived four full days in an ecstasy of happiness. She waited patiently for some letter or note from John. He had promised to write. In the sitting-room of her flat in Upper Berkeley Street, which she shared with her friend 'Pen' Warrington, she sat day-dreaming of what she called her latest 'spasm', and patiently waiting for Pen to return. Then the two would gloat over their amorous adventures, their week-end indiscretions. It was a sort of *ménage à deux*.

Pen was a blonde. The roots of the hair had thrived on peroxide, but she was intelligent, more intelligent than peroxide blondes usually are. Pen—her real name was Penelope—worked for her living, though her parents were well off. For she wanted her freedom and a flat of her own in town and found life in the country "simply a bore." She was lucky; every week she brought back with her a crisp ten-pound note for handling the publicity of a large West-End store. And ten pounds was a lot for a girl who was taken out six

days in the week and spent the seventh alone in bed.

Pen was no child. She was once considered a smashing success, an eligible debutante. Later she became a siren—devastating—dangerous. Now in her early thirties she was a slightly jaded lily. She was like a flower that had been handled too much and had lost its freshness. But men still flocked to her, for she was a woman of experience.

Daphne was comparatively young. She was still at the stage when she came back from her week-ends and repeated every word to Pen. Then she would blush and bury her head in the cushions. Pen's imagination would have to supply the rest. It was a form of dramatic licence. A story so told often surpassed the adventure itself. It was the case of the artist's picture excelling the model.

Daphne's education made many girls envious. There was Lausanne, a year in Paris and now there was Pen. The intermingling of such varied influences had a very wholesome effect on what might otherwise have been only a blue-stocking. But Daphne had learnt to preserve herself well and to look more beautiful than she really was. She had *savoir faire*. Lots of it. She knew when and with whom to enjoy life. When in Paris, she shopped in the rue de la Paix. She lunched at the Ritz, when not hungry. *Fouquets* for a drink. *Ciro's* for dinner. The rest of her evening

was nothing but dots and dashes.

Daphne was not tall, nor was she noticeably short. Her dark hair had a blonde streak, which was pre-natal. It was symbolic of her cynicism, her retort to artificiality and convention. She had a devilish black spot—a mole on her left breast, which heaved with each gentle sigh. So few men believed she could exist apart from fiction, for she was a paradox in flesh and blood. Only the cushions in which she buried herself could feel her hot breath against the lifeless down. They knew she was alive.

When Pen came in that evening, Daphne was somewhat moody. Her hair had been ruffled, her eyes sleepy, but she rolled on the divan biting off such odd bits of thread as stuck out of the cushions. It was clearly a case for Freud.

“Da—a—ph,” Pen shouted from her room, while she flung off her dress and took the comb several times through her hair and slipped on her flimsy chiffon wrap. “Da—a—ph,” the voice was raised to a squeaky C flat, “Wherarya?”

Daphne did not answer. When Pen came to the living room, she saw the prostrate figure on the divan.

“You mut,” said Pen, “All you need is a good dose of salts, a—something to cool you down.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Daphne replied. She was more like a sulky schoolgirl than a sophisticated woman.

"Darling, don't tell me you are in love again." Pen came and sat on the edge of the divan. "Luv ! just because he kissed you twice in the moonlight. It's just too revolting."

With this she tickled Daphne in the region of the solar plexus, much to her annoyance. Daphne became hysterical and screamed and her shapely legs kicked wildly in the air.

"Now, now, don't you get rough with me." Pen said this in a determined voice. She walked away and parked herself on a chair. She picked up the morning paper and ignored Daphne's apologetic moaning.

"Sorry, Pen."

But Pen would not reply.

"Pen," Daphne continued, "Pen—ny, I'm sorry, Pen. Pen—ny."

"All right—pipe down," Pen said without looking up from the paper.

"What shall I do ?"

"Well, if you ask me, I don't think he is worth bothering about. Any man who makes a girl walk after dinner is not all there. I don't care if it was Oxford and the moon was out, but nobody is going to kiss me on a hiking party. Nosur ! Not me. It's revolting, I tell you—aesthetically revolting—and economically unsound."

"But he spent a lot on me. We had caviare and vodka—red wine—and some lovely brandy in big fat glasses. He likes spending money."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"You never gave me a chance."

"And did he say he would write?"

"Yes, he promised to let me know when he came to town."

"Has he got the address?"

"Of course he has. He knows I'm living with you. In fact he was curious. Asked whether you were a sport. I told him. Then, he said, we'll have to make a foursome one day."

"Fresh—is he?"

Pen loathed young men from the Universities. To her they seemed like little boys with whom she could do little and who always wanted to play "Murder" with the lights out. "I'll spank his bottom for him if he tries to get fresh with me." This was Pen's final word.

And then Pen realized it was nearing six-thirty. She leapt up from her chair. "Lordie! Lordie! six-thirty," she said. "Baby, I must step on it."

It had become a habit with Penelope to dress in a rush every evening about this time. Her engagement book would reveal quite an assortment of men. Pen rushed into her room, turned on her bath, wondered what she would wear and when her mind was made up, she pulled out a few clothes from her wardrobe.

When Daphne looked in, some thirty minutes later, Pen had returned from her bath and was sitting at the dressing table combing her hair.

But for her chiffon gown, which hung loosely over her cold white flesh, she had nothing on. The difference between her figure now and that snaky effect she exhibited in her tight clinging skirts, was a great advertisement for the corsets she wore. Daphne stood in the doorway, with the door half ajar.

"Come in and for heaven's sake shut that door."

Daphne did. Without a murmur Daph sat down on the bed and stretched her legs over the lingerie that was lying about. She picked up a pair of green silk knickers and opened them wide. They were obviously a new pair. In one corner, embroidered in black, were four 'Chinesey' letters, hanging one below the other and which she deciphered as To-n-y. "So it's Tony tonight," Daphne said with evident delight.

Pen turned round and snatched the pair from Daphne's hand.

"Mind your own business, Nosey Parker."

"So this was what came in the parcel yesterday."

"So what?" Pen replied.

"Nothing. You will be back late tonight."

"May be," Pen said applying a thick coating of indelible lip-stick over her cold, furrowed lips. Then she took the green, silk pair and slipped them on. The accessories with her evening dress were scanty and soon she had squeezed herself into the spangled dress of green sequins that she

brought out of her well-stocked wardrobe.

"There," said Pen, with a final tug at her dress, "and who can say I am thirty-two and a day."

She dabbed her face with one last blob of powder which she then went on to spread evenly over her raddled face.

"My dear, you know you always are the centre of attraction", Daphne said, "and when Tony sees you in...."

"Not so fast, sister," said Pen in her broad Anglicized American, such as was often spoken in this *ménage*.

"Who is he anyway? Where did you pick him up?"

"Pick him up? I like that."

"Come on, Pen, come clean."

"Well," said Pen, as they stepped out into the drawing-room, "if you put it that way, his full name is Capt. the Honourable Tony Simpson-Taylor, late of the Guards. He came back from a world cruise six months ago and he will probably be going on another very soon."

"World cruise?" Daphne whistled in pleasant astonishment, and he spent his time buying green pants in China."

"No—they are from that little shop in Dover Street. I had admired them once and at lunch he said that if I promised to wear them with his name embroidered in bold black letters, he would go into the shop and order a pair. I didn't think

he'd have the nerve, but he did it."

When Pen looked at the watch it was nearing the half hour after seven. "He will be here any moment now. The Guards are trained to be punctual." And so he was, for the front-door bell rang and Pen looked out of the window on to the street below.

"Yoo—hoo, yoo—hoo", Pen waved out her hand. But when she looked in again Daphne noticed that Pen was white in the face. Something had gone wrong. Something had—and Pen made a dash for her engagement book. She turned hurriedly over the pages, ejaculated some colloquial Scotch and in a violent rage flung the book across the room.

"Why what is it?" Daphne asked.

Without answering, Pen rushed into her dressing-room and flung open her wardrobe. She made a few minor changes in her dress and rushed down the stairs damning and blasting everyone and everything that came her way. Daphne calmly looked on. She was not annoyed nor was she amazed. It had happened so often before. When Daphne looked down from the window she saw a pompous-looking middle-aged gentleman kissing Pen on both her cheeks and Pen was the picture of amiability. They stepped into a brand new limousine, a cream-coloured Delage with black wings and a left-wheel drive. In a moment they were round the corner and as they flashed past

Daphne noticed that on the number plate there was a Paris number. Later when Daphne was by herself she tidied up the divan and arranged the cushions. She picked up Pen's engagement book which was scattered in pieces all over the room. On the stray sheet marked with that day's date was written: 'Dinner 7-30 Comte de Baroque.' Tony's name appeared on the day after. Inside Pen's room the black Chinese letters lay huddled in green silk on which they were permanently embroidered. They were off duty.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE Junior Beacon Club was named after Disraeli, the Earl of Beaconsfield. Situated in St. James' Square and founded in the days of Queen Victoria, it was regarded as one of the most exclusive among the junior clubs. It was originally called the Conservative Young Men's Association and used to meet in two rooms above an Italian restaurant called "Taglionini's" in the shady locality of Soho. At the beginning of this century, it moved its premises to St. James' Square, partly because of the address but chiefly because the smell of spaghetti was getting too much for the younger generation of Conservatives. Today the Junior Beacon, as it was now called, was the official headquarters of the younger sparks of the Conservative party and membership of it, along with the usual amenities of a West-End club, carried with it the certified hall-mark of being the son of a gentleman.

Durrant made no such pretensions. The only reason why he had joined this fashionable pseudo-

political, pan-Conservative club, was, as he frankly admitted, merely because he had no home in town and the Junior Beacon was as convenient as any for the purpose of parking. Besides, Geoffrey Durrant was by persuasion a Tory. His father, who was killed in a car smash when Geoffrey was very young, had a great deal of influence on Durrant's early life and the fact that this fatal accident happened to his father on his way to Downing Street to accept the offer of the post of Secretary of State in His Majesty's Government, had always emphasized the utter futility of wealth, rank and power and stressed the very commonplace fact that man was after all mortal.

It was on account of his father that Durrant knew so many people in high places, but he did not rush round Oxford like some of his contemporaries, advertising his parentage and broadcasting the fact that among Cabinet Ministers were some of his most intimate friends. In spite of the political environment in which he was brought up, Durrant had no real flair for politics. It was only in the excitement of being President of the Union, that he had closely followed the leaders in the *Times*. He was a fluent speaker and wrote with a facile pen. He derived intense satisfaction from writing sketches in the form of One-Act plays, drawing his characters from the circle of intimate friends at Oxford. When he had finished one of these, he would throw a lunch and over some

mulclaret would read out his sketches to the great amusement and the greater embarrassment of those present. But such lunch parties were always restricted to his inner-circle. They adored listening to brilliant dialogue and their criticisms though sometimes flattering were generally bitter and pungent, always professing to speak with authority, like the book reviews of Mr. James Agate.

To Durrant, the Junior Beacon was a dining club, where the sherry was excellent and the food tolerably good. This could be said of very few clubs in St. James's Square almost all of which existed for the glorification of retired civilians with bushy eyebrows—those brave Empire builders, those ex-Collectors of outlandish districts and of exorbitant revenues—who were sent out to India and the Colonies to uphold the great tradition of Britain and who now spent the rest of their days eating mutton-ball curry and writing on their club stationery to their old bearers in Poona.

The Blue Room—restricted to the use of members and their men friends only—was commonly called 'The Stag.' The galaxy of young talent that lunched in The Stag was worthy of the Tory party. These young men were always bristling with ideas—ideas on employment, ideas on re-armament, ideas on vivisection and fox-hunting, ideas on birth-control and homo-

sexuality, ideas on which Conservative 'paulicey' was to shape in the future. "Conservative 'paulicey'," as they would say, in their long drawn, languid drawl.

It was the unwritten custom of the club that no Socialist or Communist should ever be introduced as a guest, and if any member dared to commit this breach of etiquette, the member concerned would lay himself open to instant reprimand and a sharp rebuke from the committee and all through his meal the unfortunate guest would be stared at by the hostile eyes of those, who in muffled silence protested against this intolerable intrusion. Now and again the Prime Minister or one of the other members of the Cabinet would grace the club with their distinguished and Right Honourable presence, but on all such occasions they said very little. Their lips were sealed. If only Disraeli knew !

Punctually at one o'clock, John rolled up in the family Rolls. James had timed it beautifully, taking the long route via the Mall instead of cutting through the congested traffic of Piccadilly. The commissionaire rushed up to help John out of the car, for, at the door-step of the Junior Beacon, a Rolls-Royce had a definite status. For Toby—and he had been door-man to the club twenty-years-come-Easter and opened more doors than he could remember—a gentleman arriving in a Rolls-Royce ranked in precedence slightly

below the President and perhaps the Secretary of the Club but certainly above all other members of the committee.

John acknowledged Toby's salute, straightened his suit, corrected his tie and stepped into the Junior Beacon. He inquired from the hall-porter whether his host had arrived.

"Mr. Geoffrey Durrant, sir?"

"That's right."

"Yes, sir. He is waiting for you in the lounge."

The porter called out to one of the page boys, sitting on the wooden bench near the entrance and asked this midget, who barely stood three feet—one foot of which was covered by highly polished brass buttons—to conduct Mr. John Sommerville to the lounge.

In the lounge, blue-blooded Tories were sitting in small circles sipping mild intoxicants from little coloured glasses and blowing clouds of smoke into the air. Even the smoke was blue, John noticed. Several eyes turned to him. It was a habit with these young Tories to nudge each other when someone important arrived, but in John's case they merely turned their faces away and resumed whatever discussion his presence had interrupted. Through the dense atmosphere John distinguished his host and in an instant Durrant had come up to him.

"Hullo, so glad you've come."

"I got your telegram late last night."

"I wasn't quite sure myself till late in the evening, so I took a chance and hoped you'd be free to come. Sit down."

They did.

"Well," said John, "what is it all about?"

"Actually there was no reason for my being in town this morning except that I felt like driving my very distinguished guest back. The drive has done me good. He made a brilliant effort last night. Just carried the house off its feet."

"Good work. There will probably be an opening for you in the Diplomatic."

"Not a chance. Besides I wouldn't like that. I want to write, write, write. If only my stuff would sell. That's why I have come to town to see my agents."

Durrant leant forward and rang the bell and the waiter took the order for two sherries.

"Actually," said John, "I had a feeling you had changed the subject of the debate."

"You don't want me to, do you?"

"Of course not. Only—I just wondered."

"As a matter of fact, I have even framed the motion. I think you'll like it. It sounds good."

"What is it?" John impatiently asked.

"That this House deplores the British tradition."

"The British tradition?" John looked somewhat surprised.

"Yes, that gives you scope. I hate listening to platitudes on hypothetical abstractions. It leads nowhere. And when speakers begin to expound on 'norms' and 'isms', it just gets my goat."

"But why do you pick upon the word 'British'? Why not 'English'?"

"We could have that if you want, but the word 'British' is so much more comprehensive. English tradition suggests things like the Maypole, the opening of Parliament, beef-eaters and the changing of the Guards. But take the word 'British' and you have something to talk about—British policy in world affairs—Britain's Empire—Britain's attitude to war. It covers morals, politics, democratic government, the monarchy, the landed gentry, imperialism, colonization—all that which is called our heritage. I think it would make an excellent debate. Don't you?"

"Well—I hadn't looked at it from that point of view."

They sipped their sherry. It was beautifully mellow, being served in a small barrel, which was wheeled round the rooms. John smacked his lips in appreciation.

"You see," Durrant said, "even though I am a Conservative, I feel that the younger England which is now at the universities doesn't care about all this glorified tradition that has been

handed down to us. Poverty is too grim a spectacle. It becomes more vivid every day. Hunger marches, the rise of Socialism, the growing discontent among the working classes, strikes—all these cannot be brushed aside as we used to do before. They threaten the very existence of those we commonly call the ‘haves’ and so we sit up and take notice. You and I see their poverty. You and I feel for them. You and I are prepared to make sacrifices because we are nearer to the poor than our fathers were. But the traditionist school never contemplated that possibility. I don’t know why I am going into all this. It’s for you to find the arguments.”

“Yes—yes,” said John, “but it is nice to have something to build upon.”

“You won’t let me down, will you? You won’t back out of it?”

“Why do you think so?”

“Well for one thing your family is always obsessed with the idea of tradition. Your father is of the old school. A die-hard who has often expressed his views. I thought that might influence you—or you may not have the courage to speak your mind. How can I tell?”

These thoughts, these doubts, these fears had more than once crossed John’s mind ever since he promised Durrant to speak. There was no need to mention them again. However, one thing was quite certain, namely, that these two generations

of Sommervilles would not see eye to eye on this very vital subject—and vital it was, because it had been elevated to importance by John's father.

When they strolled in to lunch, Disraeli was looking down from over the entrance to the Blue room. He needed dusting.



CHAPTER TWELVE

IN his Mews flat, St. John Caska was at work. "No. Not quite," one could hear him say. "A little more to the left. Eyes down. Steady. Now hold that. A little smile. Not too much. Look girlish. That's right. Hold it. Ready....Thank you. Relax. We got it this time, I think."

That was Innocence.

From the camera Caska took out the plate. He took it to his developing room, came out and dug in his pocket for a cigarette. From his gold case he pulled out a Turk. He lit it. He blew a cloud of light-blue smoke. He was thinking of his next subject.

His model had disappeared into the dressing-room. She took off her white Grecian tunic. Long, pleated on all sides. She combed her hair. Changed the parting from the middle to the side. Altered her make-up. Her lips were made thinner, and turned up at the sides. A little kiss-curl flaunted itself in the middle of her forehead. The

eye-lashes were made longer. She stuck a large beauty spot on the left cheek. A coquettish hat hung on one side of her head. Her blouse was of cheap check material. The rest did not matter.

In the studio he adjusted her head. Slant on side. Eyes were left wide open. The light was strong. The background dark. He put a cigarette in her mouth. The camera clicked.

That was Love For Sale.

He waited again. Patiently. He looked a man of about thirty-five. Successful. Established. With young women of fashion he was the rage. The society photographer. The Bohemian artist. The drawing room portrait. The character study. The etude. The nude. He called it art. It left him cold.

When she appeared again, she looked different. Her hair was ruffled. Her whole appearance untidy. The make-up had been toned down. Lips were no longer of deep scarlet. A loose cloak was flung around her. She sat on the floor, while the setting was adjusted and the screen and lighting arranged. He made her stretch out her arms lazily. He focussed the camera. The light was not quite right. He changed the angle. It now looked like a ray of sunshine, peeping from out of the clouds.

"Ready. Now yawn. Hold it..thank you."

That was 'The Awakening'.

He smoked another cigarette. He was so sure

of himself. Success had given him confidence. With confidence had come more success. Then security. He thought of his early struggles. His meeting with John had made him recall his miserable garret in Chelsea. The barmaid from the Rose and Crown with whom he would experiment. The picture of Ecstasy he spent hours arranging. And as he opened the lens, the girl sneezed. He had never taken that picture again. It was not worth the trouble. No one bought art pictures where the models were not exotic. All modern art was commercial. He learnt that late in life. That explained his success. Now he took what he could get from his models, and paid them for what he got. He was fair but not too generous. Now and again he struck a good bargain. Shrewd. Calculating. He had foresight. He called it intuition.

Kitty took a long time in the dressing-room. She was struggling with a pot of grease, trying to smear it all over her body. The surface had to be even and glossy, and the oil had to be rubbed well into the skin to get the right touch of youth and freshness. A tired appearance would spoil the picture. She had worked sufficiently long as a model to know what was required of her. The forehead. The nose. The mouth. Hands, arms, shoulders. Legs. Her whole body, her every limb—not a particle of her escaped the grease. She was ready. Thank God, the next three

pictures did not need change of anything except expression and pose. Money for jam.

She came into the studio. It was cold. Her body seemed to attract the cold wind which sneaked from under doors and through little slits and cracks. The high powered lamps began to warm her.

In the first of these pictures she was made to kneel down. She held her hands up. Her head was thrown far back. The lighting was peculiar. It was a chequered effect in light and shade.

That was Desire.

The next which followed immediately was a close up of the face. She bit her lower lip, and held her breath for the few seconds of exposure. Eyes were closed.

That was Passion.

Her work was nearly done. Only one more remained to complete the half dozen. He let her relax again. He was undecided how best to take this last picture. He would not be hurried. The right mood must come. The inspiration. He looked at his model. He had not observed her with any attention. He had been too engrossed in his work. Her lovely figure. Her dark hair. Her perfect complexion. Beautiful body. Profile. Sensuous lips. He became conscious of these all at once. The grease had been on her side. The trouble had been worth it.

A few minutes elapsed. He began work again.

He had not said one word more than was absolutely necessary for the taking of the pictures. She had not spoken at all.

She was now made to sit and lean back against the screen. One knee was bent. Her face looked down and was obscured by her hair, which fell forward. Her body! It shone with love. It shone with grease. Perfect repose.

This last picture was 'Afterlove.'

The day's work was done. She hurried to the dressing-room. She wiped the grease. She jumped hurriedly into her street-clothes—an odd assortment picked up from guinea shops—packed up her little case and came into the office.

He saw her there. Before him. He looked into her eyes. Dark, dark eyes, full of expression. Her face—radiant. Her body—divine. Even in his own callous way he felt for her, for she was a woman, and he had used her naked body for the glorification of his commercialized art. But his conscience was easily appeased. He gave her two guineas. The fee for the sitting. Six pictures in any shape or form. One woman.

Late that evening, long after dinner, when he had finished his work, Caska stepped out of his retreat, his ultra-modern studio which he had installed in a mews flat. The air was crisp and the sky beautifully clear. No rain clouds threatened to spoil the calmness of this perfect evening. Caska usually made it a point to walk after dinner,

unless the weather was really bad or his limbs particularly tired. He was still thinking of the little girl in his studio. Her body had stimulated him. Too much in fact. Such perfect breasts. Narcotic. But it was only an ephemeral sensation, and like all other sensations it passed with each new pair of breasts. Yet while it lasted he did not wish to encrust his freedom of visualization in the smelly atmosphere of a London cab. So Caska walked on from Grosvenor Mews to Grosvenor Square, through Mount Street to Berkeley Square, through Berkeley Street to Piccadilly. "Body, body, body," he muttered to himself, "but no soul."



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JOHN had promised to take Anne to the theatre that evening and over lunch he induced Durrant to join them and stay in town till after the show and to drive back to Oxford late at night. So it was pointless for John to return to Galford Park. Anne would bring his evening clothes with her and he could slip these on while she sipped a drink and chewed almonds.

There was nothing in particular that John wanted to do that afternoon and Durrant had left him after lunch to go to his agents about some of the work he had entrusted them. It was so long since John had had time on his hands to potter round that he decided to spend this afternoon looking at the shop windows and their lavish display of merchandise. This garnishing of goods had become a fine art and men and women had full time jobs as window-dressers and got paid for it. Leisurely he strolled down the crowded pavements of the West End for the afternoon was pleasant and the lobster *à la American* he had

tucked in, needed a slight dressing down to prevent it from ebulating in the form of short, staccato hiccups.

At shop after shop he paused—in Bond Street—in Vigo Street—in Regent Street—the cigarette cases of Cartier—the squares of Edouard and Butler—the whole house of Sulkas—the three-length shirts of Austin Reed. Innumerable shops varying in price, varying in reputation displayed gorgeous gowns and perfect models, which only mannequins could wear. Fat women looked wistfully at what they could afford but could not wear, for their vile bodies would not squeeze into the little space these exotic creations allowed. It was such a pathetic picture of frustration.

In the window of one of these houses of luxury, John saw a little girl arrange a new dress, which she was attempting to display in the window. He watched her carefully. She was a cute little thing. Dark hair, small, slight build, dressed in the uniform black of working London. She was draping the full skirts of an evening dress. She would go back a step or two to look at the effect from a distance. She adjusted the folds. No, she thought, biting her nails in silent contemplation—and she started all over again. John waited to see what would eventually result from this great output of thought and energy. Hundreds of people were passing by, but in her glass cage she was hardly conscious of their presence. Nor

had she noticed John, who was being jostled about the pavement by the incessant stream of passers-by. Much later, when she had finished arranging the dress, she looked up from her work and saw a strange face desperately near her. She was taken aback, forgetting for a moment that she was separated from him by a large quantity of thick glass. She smiled at her own forgetfulness, but John was concentrating on the dress, which in his judgment was not so well displayed after all. It worried him if only aesthetically. So he tapped on the glass to draw her attention and with gestures, which passers-by might have mistaken for a dumb charade, indicated to her the position he thought would be most effective. To his surprise she took notice of him, draped the gown all over again as he directed from outside and when it was over she acknowledged the improvement with a gentle salute. He could not hear what she said, but he deciphered from the movements of her lips the words: "O. K. chief."

John was very pleased with his work of art. Aesthetically it was perfect, artistically it was balanced. Yet he was surprised he had meddled at all. It was the sort of thing Caska might have done. But there he was and the fact that he had succeeded, justified his interference. John doffed his hat politely and strolled away. "Cute kid," he said to himself as he walked on, "intensely human, these little things in shop windows, who

live on three-pound-ten a week and had their little sorrows and their little cares to think about."

His next halt was at a gramophone shop where he went in to hear some records. He was tired of loitering and this was a cheap way of spending the rest of the afternoon. Patiently he waded through an album of Bach and eventually came out after ordering the Prelude which was out of stock. Bach was good for the nerves and John needed something to get him in the mood for the theatre in the evening.

That night they went to see *Hamlet*. It was written by Shakespeare for Elizabethans and interpreted by Gielgud for highbrows. Yes, highbrows they certainly were. No one else went to see *Hamlet*. Highbrows! They were the people who went to Salzburg for the festival and to Malvern to see the latest Shaw. They were the select few, who could recognize the music of Constance Lambert and understand the choreography of Fokine. They were the people who read Wells and Huxley, and went to the Academy only on the private day. They were 'amongst those present' at first nights, and decided what should be read, what should be heard, what should be seen. They laid down the standard by which lesser men must be guided. Highbrows! Cold, cold, people. Intellects that had been nursed in incubators and preserved in frigidaires to prevent them from rotting. So different from the people

who sat back in their chairs and were touched by the melodrama of *White Cargo* or dabbed their handkerchiefs to their eyes at the patriotism of *Cavalcade* or cheered to the echo the front line of Mr. Cochran's beautiful girls — different even from the people, who turned over the pages of the *Observer* every Sunday and piously read Mr. Garvin on Conservatism, Mr. Garvin on the Empire, Mr. Garvin on Protection, Mr. Garvin on everything that was noble and uplifting. Highbrows had no use for Mr. Garvin. They found his politics stuffy and anyway who cared whether it was "Now or Never" or "Whither Britain" or "Democracy or Dictatorship"? Highbrows certainly did not care, for they were unperturbed even by the most powerful influx of emotion.

The old form of drama was dead and even the music halls were being pushed into the background. On the ashes a new theatre was being built. A theatre for highbrows. It was sophisticated in its presentation, cynical in outlook, restrained in expression, moving quickly like rapid cameo pictures that are being flashed across the screen, thumping with brilliant dialogue, every word of which had a punch in it. It was a drama of action and even the platitudes were not commonplace.

To this highbrow theatre went John and Anne and Geoffrey Durrant. Anne wore black taffeta and looked attractive. John escorted her in a

white tie. Only Durrant had come unchanged. For this he apologized to Anne as he had met her for the first time. But she did not mind, for she liked him, and she liked him more because he had the courage to sit in a grey check suit in the middle of the stalls. Durrant's visit to his agents had been particularly successful. And he celebrated his success with a bottle of champagne in the interval. It was a pleasant surprise for Anne and John, and the barmaid was left standing with her mouth wide open and three ten-shilling notes in her hand, for *Hamlet* and champagne made a queer mixture—and the ghost scene had yet to come.

"You are rather extravagant, aren't you?" Anne said relieving him of one of the glasses.

"I have reason to be. I don't do this every day. I feel quite rich to-day", Durrant replied feeling the wad of pound notes that lay in his breast-pocket.

"What have you been doing?" John asked.

"Well, for one thing when I went to see my agents this afternoon., I got a commission for three short stories from a new illustrated paper that is coming out very soon. Ten guineas a piece and they paid me for one in advance. I have a hunch you brought me luck."

But Durrant did not look up at either.

"Marvellous," Anne exclaimed, "well, here's to many more such lucky breaks for you."

She sipped the wine from her glass and glanced with one eye at Durrant. Durrant did the same. It was a strange coincidence. Their eyes met. Kindly. They knew they would meet again.

John was happy too. He was glad he had found some one among his acquaintances who had done something worth while. When he had finished his drink he turned to Durrant and asked: "What happened to the stuff you left with them?"

"You mean the play?"

"You never told me what it was."

"Yes, it is a play and if the gods are as kind to me as they have been today, you'll see my name written in flaming letters across the sky. But if the gods are not so kind—well—you won't. That's all."

"Do I get a ticket for the opening night?" Anne naively asked.

"One ticket? You can have a box to yourself."

"To myself? What's the use of that?"

"Well—for the three of us then. Is it a date?" Durrant asked.

Anne lifted her glass and let it linger on the lips. She turned to John and said: "It's a date?" And John confirmed it. "To the three of us!" Durrant repeated and as he drained his glass the curtain went up on the second act of *Hamlet*.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE rest of the week-end passed quite peacefully at Galford Park. There were no more ebullitions from Ronald Sommerville, no more vitriolic outbursts, no lengthy tirades. He seemed exhausted after his one impassioned declamation and he had persuaded himself to believe that John would soon get over this phase of adolescence and that the Sommerville in him would pull him through whatever deviations he may be tempted to make. For he was flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood, and Ronald was sure that in the long run these would tell, and that all the so-called convictions of youth would fade away in the face of this strong urge which John would sooner or later feel within him—the urge to respect the institutions which were sacred to the Sommervilles, respect for God, respect for King and country, respect for conventional morality, which was the only morality that had crystallized itself to command respect. The fault with John was his youth. But time would run its own course and

with it would come maturity and a seasoned outlook on the more important problems of life. Yes, time—that was all John needed—time to mature. This was how Mr. Sommerville summed up the problem, which had troubled him of late—the upbringing of his only son.

John was in a calmer frame of mind, for he had rested in the sanctuary of Galford Park. He now avoided any discussion with his father and whenever he was alone he would think over the subject of Thursday's debate, and often break out into perorations, which he delivered in front of the large mirror of his Georgian wardrobe. Once he had felt embarrassed, when Emma walked in without announcing herself and then apologized for the intrusion, and for the embarrassment she had caused. But Emma thought John was only reciting poetry as he used to in his prep school days, when dressed as a sailor boy he would recite *The Wreck of the Hesperus* at some of his mother's tea parties. And Emma thought nothing more of it.

On Monday, John returned to Oxford. Term was half over. The freshers had settled down and their shopping excursions were becoming less and less frequent as their needs—China, linen, stationery—were gradually satisfied. Autumn leaves had shed long ago, the bare stalks were shrivelling up and the facades of those fourteenth century structures were beginning to

show from behind the dried creepers. There was rain and the first flakes of snow melted in the slush underneath the constant tramping of town and gown. The surrounding moors had lost their freshness and those who were accustomed to summer walks over Cumnor Hill and Shotover had now to content themselves paddling in the swamps. Only now and again from the grey skies the sun would peep out and then the clouds, which trailed against the drabness of the heavens, would find their edges tinged with gold and burning with all the fire of that rich warmth. It was like one of Hans Anderson's more picturesque fairy tales, the golden chariot drawn by fleet-footed grey horses—winged steeds dashing noiselessly through space, racing, racing against time. They saw this gorgeous splendour splashed all over the face of heaven—these undergraduates who walked with their hands in the pockets of their dirty grey bags. And they still kept walking with their hands in their pockets. To them it made no difference what colour the sky was. Nature and its simplicity left them cold. Their feelings were not affected by the beautiful things in life, but only by the base and ugly. They felt for poverty, they felt for a troupe of hunger-marchers who crossed their path, they felt for humanity that had been uprooted from the soil, and cast aside by those who had no use for it, decaying, as all flesh will, when life has been squeezed out of it—but

nature, luscious skies in the style of Reubens and all the sunsets of Turner, the green of trees, the scent of flowers, left them cold. Oxford had learnt to tolerate so much that now it had begun to regard even beauty only with tolerance. Such was the Oxford of the early thirties.

So Monday passed and the Tuesday and the days that followed it. The same feverish activity, that same effervescence of superfluous energy, that same studied indifference. Days were merely numbers and months were only names, which they struck off in quick succession in the little notebooks they carried. There was nothing of any importance to distinguish one from the other. But for John, Thursday had some significance. For him it symbolized his whole struggle for independence. It was one of those days he wanted to encircle with red pencil, and when it was over he could either smudge it off his mind or put little asterisks around it and draw sweet forget-me-nots.

Thursday arrived. It had come slower than other days. Time was slowing down. First the morning. At eight o'clock his scout had called him. There was breakfast. Nine o'clock struck. Ten. Each hour striking with greater force, with greater consciousness than the one before. At eleven he ran out for coffee. At twelve he had returned. The hands of the clock began on their slow march again. One, two, three—and now

even the half-hours were beginning to strike — punctuating the day with the decisive intervals in which time had divided itself. Four! Four-thirty! And there was tea and anchovy toast. He ate because he was hungry, pacing the room hour after hour, waiting, waiting for the time when he could lean on that despatch-box as so many others had leant before. That time did arrive though not till some four hours later and then a blackness clouded his eyes and the eleven hundred faces moved in a haze before him. Only his voice, raised in the uncomfortable quiet that followed the applause, awakened him.

“Mr. President, Sir.....,” he heard himself say. Then he knew where he was.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

UNKNOWN to John, his father had that same evening made an important speech at the annual dinner of the Empire Builders. Mr. Sommerville had been asked to propose the toast of the Empire and it was universally acknowledged by those present that they could have made no better choice. The intelligentsia who controlled the destiny of the Empire regarded the utterances of Ronald Sommerville with the same reverence they showed for Mr. Baldwin when he unsealed his lips, or for Mr. Chamberlain when he disclosed the budget or to Mr. Geoffrey Dawson when he wrote in the *Times*. Mr. Sommerville was one of those charmed people who walked about with a perpetual halo round the head, and the Empire Builders were proud to count Mr. Sommerville as one of them. So, while the father spoke of the greatness of the Empire, the son was denouncing the tradition on which it was based. The contrast was full of pathos, drama, irony, and Fleet Street journalists

found in this conflict of generations a story which they splashed in glaring head-lines all over the front page.

"Father and Son," "The Irony of Nature," "Clash," "The Revolt of Youth," were some of the captions which faced Mr. Sommerville at the breakfast-table on Friday morning. It left him speechless, nor could Mrs. Sommerville or Anne venture to break the silence. The bold letters on the front page hit him in the face, and when he recovered from the daze, he glanced at the parallel columns in which the utterances of the two were contrasted.

Line by line he perused John's speech at the Oxford Union. Every word was like a death blow that had been cruelly dealt—like stabbing a man unawares in the back, treacherously, ungallantly, such as Ronald had never expected from his own son. At the Empire Builders he had spoken "of the glory that was Britain's—stretching out her Empire across the face of this earth—exercising its civilizing influence over countries and people who had been less fortunate—claiming sovereign power over a third of the world's population—always standing for democracy—for justice—for peace and good-will among men. Service for humanity is our motto."

That was the England of Ronald Sommerville. That was the England to which the world must look up in reverence and admiration. "Only

a strong and powerful England could rely upon itself to withstand aggression from any of those neighbouring states of Europe whose militarism was waiting feverishly to find an outlet for self-expression. There was only one way in which security could be established — only one way by which Englishmen could be sure that Britannia would still rule the waves, and this could only be achieved by a new plan for the universal overhauling of armaments. For all the nonsense that silver-tongued pacifists glibly spout, the only hope of securing peace in Europe and of maintaining the balance of power is by establishing an army, a navy and an air force which could rival in strength and greatness the collective forces of the rest of Europe."

These remarks were received with tremendous applause and the Empire Builders gave vent to their feelings, regardless of any restraint whatsoever. For Mr. Sommerville was re-echoing with greater force and clarity their own feelings, and the sentiments of those who belonged to the gracious Society of the Empire Builders.

And now Mr. Sommerville's eye turned to the other parallel column and voraciously he devoured, word by word, the powerful denunciation which his son had delivered overnight. It was as if his life-work had been undone in the twinkling of an eye.

John had made some very caustic remarks

about the morality of the England of his day. In the peroration which was quoted, he had said: "It is the England that proscribed *The Well of Loneliness* and convicted Oscar Wilde, but still sends its sons to public schools—the England that sneers at women who pet in the park, but features those who solicit in the south of France—the England that regards Karl Marx as unhealthy but looks upon decrepit die-hards as country gentlemen—the England that clamours for re-armament and yet wears poppies on Armistice Day—the England in which we were born and brought up. It is the England our children must never see."

This was not all. John had gone out of his way to defend Socialism as the one hope of saving humanity from the slaughter-house. After a brilliant exposition of the significance of that creed, he went on to add a vitriolic attack on the generation that had preceded his — the generation to which Ronald Sommerville and members of the Empire Builders Society obviously belonged. "That generation," John had said, "had no use for Socialism. It always believed that every cloud had a silver lining and that there was prosperity round the corner of every great depression. All that they have done for the workless, for the poor, for the unemployed is to ask them to have faith in God and to hold up their hands in prayer and wait for manna to drop.

I do not believe, Mr. President, that that miracle ever happened. Nor do I believe that it will happen now."

That was enough for Mr. Sommerville. It was not only rabid Bolshevism, it bordered on blasphemy. He dropped the paper, and without a word to his wife or daughter, he left the breakfast-table. He had not touched a morsel of food when he ordered James to bring out the car. Ronald Sommerville was going straight to Oxford.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE Warden of John's college had an unexpected visitor in Ronald Sommerville that morning. A refined-looking, cultured, tactful old man, the Warden had contrived to keep young in the company of the youth around him. His views on life were hardly those of his own generation for he was tolerant and very understanding. He was much respected and quite the most popular don at Oxford.

There were many stories told about him and about his broad outlook on life. There was one he told himself with obvious delight. It had happened some years ago when he sent for a young man to chastise him for the noisy party of the night before.

"I asked him," the Warden would say, "what all that noise was for, and he said it was his twenty-first. Well, naturally, I didn't say any more about it. A fortnight later he comes up to me and asks me for leave to go to town for the week-end. He had been down twice before and I didn't think it right to let him go, unless he had

a good reason. I asked him why he wanted to go to town and pat came the answer: 'Sir, it's my sister's twenty-first and mother is keen on my coming.' I reeled back in my chair and laughed my sides out. The little rascal!"

"And did you let him go, Warden?"

"Of course, I did, what else could I do?"

Such was the Warden of John's college on whom Mr. Sommerville called that morning. The Warden was not the type to coerce the young on matters which he thought they ought to decide for themselves.

"Well, Mr. Sommerville, I dare say it must have been very embarrassing for you, but even so it is difficult for us to dictate to young men on such questions."

"I don't agree with you, Warden. I think I have a right to. He owes that much to me."

"Very well, Mr. Sommerville, I'll send for the boy. But I don't undertake to side with you on this question. You must tell him what you think, yourself. I shall preserve perfect neutrality. Perhaps, it would be even better if you saw him alone in his rooms."

"I would have preferred it to come from you because he has so much more faith in your judgment than he has in mine," Mr. Sommerville pathetically pleaded.

"I shouldn't say that, but it strengthens my argument, Mr. Sommerville. I am against this

interference in the lives of young men merely because of their ideas of life or because their moral code does not coincide with ours. We have to adjust ourselves to these changing times and realize that these young men are fast growing up. Tomorrow they will be the backbone of Britain and I would hate to cramp their style. Let them think for themselves, speak for themselves—even though you know they are wrong. It is the finest education they'll have and that is why Oxford still stands where it does—because of its tolerance.”

Mr. Sommerville collected his hat which was lying on the ground near him. Politely but firmly, he said: “I suppose you are right. I should see him alone. It would be better. I can't say I am not tolerant, but there are limits to that tolerance and to overstep those bounds will do these young men little good. They are like unbroken horses and you have to take them early in hand.”

As Mr. Sommerville rose, the Warden smiled and said: “Break them gently, my friend, they have a long way to go.” But Mr. Sommerville did not answer. The Warden's tolerance left him cold.

Mr. Sommerville said good-bye to the Warden and left the study. He waited in his son's rooms while the porter went to fetch John who was attending a lecture. His father's visit was not anticipated by him, but John was not surprised

at what happened.

"Good morning, father," he said as he entered his rooms.

"Morning. I'll be very brief with you, John. I have just spoken to the Warden about you. I decided that either you retract every word of what you have said and explain it away as a rag debate or I am afraid there is no room in the college for you."

"The Warden said so?"

"I say so, John. I don't pay for you to go and make a fool of yourself in public and drag me along with you. Either this has got to stop or you go your way and do any damned thing you like. I'll have nothing to do with you. Think it over and good-bye."

Mr. Sommerville took his hat and left the room so abruptly that John did not at first know how serious the old man was. It was so unlike his father, unlike the parent he had known. There was a ring in the tone of that familiar voice which was different to anything his father had yet said. Somehow, this little affair at the Union had touched Ronald to the quick. Yet, it shouldn't have been so. It was the privilege of youth to utter irresponsible things. For what else was it to be young? Yet even to John it had been more than a speech at the Union. He had said so to Durrant when Durrant first came to his rooms. John had made it the turning-point in his outlook on life, hardly

expecting that the turn would be so sudden and so sharp. He had got carried away by his own enthusiasm to the point of convincing his father that the son could not and would not tread the Sommervillian path. The worm had turned and to Ronald Sommerville the work of whole generations had been undone. It was as serious as that, and John was beginning to realize the full significance of what to others appeared only a debate at the Union.

Well might John have said that day: "Give me a light that I might step into the unknown" but no one would hear his plaintive cry. Behind him was tradition, a family name, security—a safe passage through life in all the liners of luxury. Yet that was the world he had just turned back upon and so blatantly disclaimed. He could never turn back — never. Ahead was a wilderness — conflict, struggle, despondency, despair. No harbour lights, no port of call. In the tempestuous sea he would be like a raft, drifting, drifting, drifting. Today was a day for drifting and all other days, till the drifters would one day inherit the earth.

It did not take long for John to decide on the course he would adopt. He left a note of apology for the Warden, for John knew his Warden well, packed a few things and as the 4-30 steamed out of Oxford station, he caught a last glimpse of those cloistered towers he had lived amongst and

loved. Culture ! Anarchy ! Flaming youth !
It was good-bye to all that.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JOHN'S entry into London was not an event of any social importance. It was a quiet affair and the family Rolls was not there to receive him. Taxis too were a luxury in the life on which John was about to embark. He had, as it were, fallen off the gold standard and before he could find his new level, there was bound to be a corresponding fall in the standard of living. Galford Park was out of the question and the apartments in Curzon Street were more than he could afford. But there were people in London who did not live in six-guinea flats and whose parents did not own a mansion-house in the country. There were wage-earners who got little more than two-pound-ten a week and who lived within their incomes. There were students who paid little more than a pound a week for rooms in Tavistock square. Of all that John had vaguely heard. He had never bothered to find out what Tavistock Square looked like or what sort of human beings lived there. Students—this was a comprehensive term embracing many

people. They did not all go to schools or colleges. There were students of philosophy, who did nothing but read Kant and Hegel and wrote poems in blank verse in their leisure moments. There were students of art who dabbled in oils and water. There were students of life and God knows what they dabbled in. But they all lived in Tavistock Square.

John took a taxi—a necessary expenditure—and drove to this dismal quarter of London, built in dark-grey stone and covered with the soot of neighbouring chimneys, in the hope of finding a house with rooms to let. When he did, he stepped out and rang the bell. Patiently he waited while the footsteps, heavy and probably gout-laden came nearer the door. When it was opened, there stood before him a middle-aged woman—fat—ugly—smiling. She was the bulwark of the British Empire, the sort of woman who thought she represented the nation, the sort of Christian who went to the dogs on Saturdays and knelt in church next morning. There were hundreds of thousands of women like her, all fat and ugly, yet always smiling.

“Have you any apartments to let?”, John inquired.

She ran her eyes over him in grim silence, examined his respectability and gave the cautious reply: “Well, I’ve and I’ve n’t.”

“You have and you haven’t? Couldn’t you

make up your mind ? ”

“ It’s like this — my ’usband is kind of particular the gents I takes in, but may be you look all right. But no women mindya.”

“ No women,” John emphatically assured her.

“ Come upstairs and ’ave a look, sir.”

“ Thank you.”

As she went up the stairs pulling down her dress to where it should be, she said : “ How soon will you be wanting it ? ”

“ Oh, right now.”

“ Well, you can ’ave it. It’s a pound a week with breakfast and I says to ’Arry there’s the best rooms in the square.”

“ A pound a week with breakfast ? ”

“ Yes, and I don’t give Danish bacon neither. Buy British, I says. I charge one-and-six-pence for lunch and two shillings for dinner—but you can please yourself. Good and wholesome food I gives. English meat too. Nothing from the Hargentine.”

They arrived at the first floor and overlooking the Square was the vacant apartment. There were two rooms. The bedder was on the inner side and a dirty-looking affair it was, but two rooms were two rooms and as good as any at a pound a week, with an English breakfast thrown in.

“ I’ll take these,” John said after a hurried inspection.”

"Rent in advance and mindya, no girls."

"No girls, Mrs. . . . eh?"

"The name is Livingstone-Thurlow — Mrs. Livingstone-Thurlow."

"Oh?"

"You see, 'Arry—that is my second 'usband is 'Arry Thurlow and I buried my first four years ago. He was a dear and loved me, he did, but 'Arry, well—I shouldn't complain to a stranger—he is a one."

"Thank you, Mrs. Livingstone-Thurlow, but could you send the maid up with the bags?"

"We dont keep a maid, sir. 'Arry and I do all the work between us. You see," and here she became all confidential and in a hushed voice: "I used to keep 'Etty. Nice girl she was. Good-looking and what do I find? There was 'Arry at it again. So I says to myself no girls in this house, Mrs. Thurlow. But of course when I says no girls, I do stretch a point and now and again you can bring your friends if they are kind of respectable."

"Oh, thank you. I'll go down now and square up the cab."

John brought up his bags and unpacked a few things. His landlady helped him as much as she could, but John found her more of a nuisance than a help. The door was half open while she was tidying the room and someone from the flat above was coming down the stairs.

"Going out, Mr. Pimlico?", she said in her sweet voice, reserved only for such occasions, for the benefit of new lodgers.

"Yes, Mrs. Thurlow, I am. Work—you know one has to work," Mr. Pimlico replied.

"All toshed up like that. It's a shaime," then pulling herself together, "quaite a shame! But you actors 'ave to do it."

"Good night, Mrs. Thurlow."

Through the crack John could see a young man in evening clothes. The light on the stairs was dim but enough to show what the man was wearing. Top hat, white-tie and tails! All in Tavistock Square. Dark horses lived here.

Very soon Mrs. Thurlow cleared up the mystery. Mr. Pimlico had been with her for two months now. He was "sort of regular," as she put it. He paid every week and only one girl came to see him, and she was only his fiancée. His name sounded foreign and Mrs. Thurlow was sure he looked "kind of Spanish-like," but she had never investigated Mr. Pimlico's ancestry. As for his work, he strolled out about this time six days in the week, "all dressed up beautifully-like" and what impressed Mrs. Thurlow most and gave her a standing with her laundry, was that the only three dress-shirts they collected every week from Tavistock Square came from Mrs. Thurlow's. What theatre he played at or what part no one would ever know, for he went to no rehearsals,

came back from 'work' late at night, sometimes even early in the morning and the rest of the day he invariably spent in bed. But he paid his pound a week regularly every Monday, and that was all that interested Mrs. Thurlow.

"Mrs. Thurlow, if it's not too inconvenient, could you fix up something by way of food tonight? I don't quite feel like dining out."

"Always something in the 'ouse. Nice piece of roast lamb and mint sauce and some Brussels sprouts, and cherry-flan for the sweet."

"That will be very nice, thanks."

So when Mrs. Thurlow—Mrs. Livingstone-Thurlow—left him to fetch the roast lamb and cherry-flan, John began carefully to survey the cheap lodgings he had rented in sheer desperation. The furniture in the living-room was old and dowdy and the chairs seemed to have elephantiasis in the legs. A huge mirror hung over the delapidated mantelpiece and even the image in it was distorted. There was a bookshelf in one corner of the room on which stood three solitary books. It was obvious the last tenant had not much use for them for they were covered with dust. These three books made a queer trilogy. There was the Holy Bible, an old volume of the Geographical Society, and, believe it or not, A. J. Russell's "*For Sinners Only*." Someone had obviously been guided to leave them behind.

In the adjacent room, which on further acquaint-

tance John began to call "the bedder", there was a wash-stand and a wardrobe and a dressing-table of sorts, and a large brass bed with a creaking spring-board and unpolished knobs. By the dresser hung *The Judgment of Paris*, and on one side of the bed on a dusty wooden-board was inscribed "Honour thy father and mother.." Yes, it was one of those houses where morality was plastered like frescos on the wall and mottoes and inscriptions were ingrained in brick and mortar. Even under the bed on a piece of old china, which had been so long in the house it had got almost domesticated, was written *Honi soît qui mal y pense*. God knows what it meant.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE same evening—in the very heart of London, the waters of oblivion gushed from the statue of Eros, and in Piccadilly Circus the light played such funny tricks with those who shone and faded in its flicker. John, who had left his poky little rooms to breathe the cool evening air, looked somewhat lost in this frenzied crowd. The sons of circumcision who paced swiftly to and fro bewildered him and the daughters of Zion with their sebaceous bodies sweating of cheap perfume made him hold his breath. The hour was late and night had cast its shadows and the temples of amusements had their doors flung open for worship. The franco sign of Café Napoleon illuminated the entrance, and the heavy doors swung round and round, while birds flitted in and out. Yes, birds—for this was Bohemia.

The theatres were nearly over and at the stage doors the parasites hung round. In their Rolls-Bentleys they would lean back as if the troubles of the world were over and a wild party was

about to begin. There they were with their soft silk shirts, those bow-ties like shoe-laces, those silk-lined jackets of midnight blue, and a gardenia efflorescent in their buttonholes. This fraternity of the perpetually workless. This mighty problem of leisured unemployment.

Inside the green rooms the Flossies and Queenies were adjusting their two-and-eleven-pennies and contemplating the future that lay before them. They were probably on their way to the stage-manager's flat in Jermyn Street. He was throwing a party and had asked 'the girls' to come and amuse his guests. Business is business and the girls were glad of it. Whatever happens, the show must go on. After all it was art. Wasn't it?

Art—a sensuous beast that wallowed in the embraces of lewd women and groped round their protruding breasts, till their frozen meat began to throb with achings, though not of unquenched desire. Art—that squirmed round whatever was wrapped up in a skirt till exhausted and panting it fell back into its chair, wiping the saliva that was dripping from its mouth. Art—she adjusted her dress and her spangled form relaxed as it freed itself from the tight clutches. The show must go on. If only for art's sake.

So they would powder their noses and thank God that "Revue" was still the salvation of surplus women.

At ten past eleven, like a mighty dam the theatres burst and a thousand insignificant people flooded the streets of the West End. All this John had noticed from afar and in its aloofness it had seemed slightly fantastic, hardly real. Now he could no longer afford to neglect its pulsating reality. Grosvenor Street and Berkeley Square had closed its doors to him and Café Napoleon was the last refuge of the restless. Café Napoleon ! This haunt of intelligentsia, this kind foster-mother of lost souls and forsaken beliefs, this coffee-house of post-Oxford and Chelsea artists—this maternity home for promiscuous ideas.

Unannounced, the characters walked in and out—a Fleet Street journalist evolving a scoop, an undergraduate novelist collecting material, an Indian “stood-cent” posing as a Persian Count, while a few ordinary people looked blankly around. Nothing ever impressed anybody and even women in tailor-made suits were only Thesbians. Yes—nothing ever impressed anybody. This desolating melancholy sameness.

It was a café in the true sense of the word. The French would have called it a *bistro*. There was no music. The clatter of plates, the loud greeting of ‘hearties’, the yodeling of drunkards, the hushed voices of lovers who conversed in whispers, the heated arguments of politicians and the grumbling of under-tipped waiters, produced a definite sound-effect of its own, but it could

hardly be called music. Atmosphere. Setting. Background. Colour. Call it what you like, but altogether it made a hell of a noise. Yet no one seemed to mind. It seemed part of the place, as if it was thrown in free with whatever you ordered, and judging from the business they did, it didn't look as if the management cared a damn about those who complained. 'Take it or leave it' was written on the face of every member of the staff.

John sat down at a corner table all by himself. He was lucky to get a seat at all. It was depressing to watch other people chat and laugh and enjoy life, while he sat there looking on wistfully, with no one to speak to except the waiter who came to take the order. He had had little to eat and what food he had seen earlier in the evening—his landlady called it 'dinner'—had ruined whatever appetite he may have had. So he settled down to a double liqueur brandy—the mention of which awoke the sleepy waiter and the rich aroma of which kept John's head above water. Yes, things had gone so bad that for John it was a matter of life and death. He was like a drowning man clinging to anything he could lay hands on. But there was not even a straw in sight. Not a straw.

The tide turned and with it to his great surprise a raft came floating past. Who would have believed it? Arthur Marsden, of all people. Arthur Marsden in the flesh, and if ever John was

glad to see him it was now. Arthur Marsden!—who had stepped into John's rooms one morning. Arthur Marsden, that typical product of the English public school. Here he was in town with his Dean's permission—alone in the Café Napoleon. In reality it was nothing short of a miracle, but we cynics—ungodly disbelievers—would call it coincidence.

John did not take any chances. He dashed towards the door from which Arthur was surveying the world, caught him by the arm and without giving him a chance to say much, fetched him to his own table and ordered for him the same large quantity of brandy.

“Well—well—well! I never,” Arthur said, “never dreamt I'd meet you here.”

“I am surprised at myself—and at you.”

All their differences, their mutual dislikes were in that instant drowned. The brandy had killed all the germs. They finished their glasses and Arthur ordered two more. The world around them had changed. Actually they were looking at it through coloured glasses, and people—everyone around them—looked perfect specimens of that large nation we affectionately call humanity. What had appeared decadent only a while ago now merely looked strange and intriguing. Even the ‘poofs’, who minced about the room and greeted each other in squeaky voices, did not seem quite so effeminate as before.

And when 'poofs' began to look like men, it was obvious there was something potent in the brandy.

They drained their glasses and John ordered two more drinks. This time he called for *fine à l'eau*, and Arthur whose French was weak said it tasted like brandy—which it was.

"I feel grand." Arthur said as he sipped out of the fresh glasses.

"So do I," John boisterously replied, "who cares a damn?"

"On what excuse have you come to town?"

"Excuse?" John repeated, "no excuse. Don't you know I am master of myself."

The significance of this was lost on Arthur who knew nothing of the recent happenings in John's life and career. In fact hardly any one knew of his break with the family. Arthur thought it was probably the brandy.

"Master of yourself!—come, come—you'll have to tell that to your tutor," Arthur said.

"Forget it and let's drink. God says drink." And in one gulp John swallowed the brandy. In that moment he thought of the young married couple who came to Oxford to see Dr. Buchman and confessed to much which they later regretted. They went on a cruise to forget it all and Buchman sent them a wire saying: "Let God be with you." And they had replied: "God says drink."

"Yes" said Arthur, "Let's forget the good, old *alma mater*. The old cathedral city. Dear old

Oxford. Let's beat it up tonight. What do you say, John? A couple of wenches and we are set for the evening. What do you say?"

John was taken so much aback that for a moment he didn't know what to say. He never knew Arthur had it in him to bring it out even as a suggestion. It was the more surprising when it came from this school-fellow of his, now with him at the same university and wearing the same old school-tie—of all persons from Arthur, who openly voiced his abhorrence for skirts—for painted Jezebels—as he called them. It was too good a chance to be missed and John would always regret he let go an opportunity of seeing Arthur make an ass of himself. "Yes, let's", John said "I'm game—game for anything. Let's paint the town red. Blood red. I don't care, I'd love it. Do me good too. But where can you raise the women?"

"Well," said Arthur, blushing slightly as he dipped into his breast-pocket, "Of course, we can't expect little puritans to be out at this time of the night. But if you are not particular, I can try a few telephone numbers."

"Arthur Marsden! Mr. Marsden, I say, you surprise me," John ejaculated. "I never thought you had it in you."

"Well, they are quite clean," Arthur blushingly replied. "I've been to some of them before and found them quite entertaining."

He called the waiter as he passed and asked him to charge their glasses again.

"Feen-a-what was that?"

"*Fine à l'eau, monsieur.*", the waiter helped him out.

"That's the stuff. Get it. Quick."

"*Pour les deux?*", the waiter asked.

Arthur looked appealing at John, who nodded to the waiter. This French business had always worried Arthur. It annoyed him intensely that here in his own native England, he could not get a drink without expressing his wants in a second language. Damned impertinence, Arthur thought. And as if that was not enough, Mr. Baldwin was thinking of making history and of changing geography by moving the frontiers of England to the banks of the Rhine. Where was it all leading to? Very soon we would see the touching spectacle of the Prime Minister of England embracing the leader of the Opposition on the floor of the House of Commons and with tears of joy and sorrow exclaim: "Ah! Mon cher ami, mon cher ami."

Poor, poor England! How she has suffered at the hands of her statesmen. Eight plates of untouched sandwiches paid tribute to that suffering. A silent but expensive tribute for the law had said: Thou shalt not drink after hours if thou canst not also afford to eat."

"Well," Arthur repeated, "how about it?"

Shall we ? ”

It then struck John that he also knew a girl called Daphne de Lamas. He remembered the Sunday at Oxford. She was not just a telephone number. And although she did not do much, what she did was good enough. And he would rather neck Daphne for a brief hour than spend a night in bed with an English whore. Daphne had a friend too and that would be just perfect for Arthur.

“ Wait,” John said “ I’ve got an idea. Wait here for a moment. I shan’t be long.”

John went into the telephone box in the *foyer* and rang up Daphne. He was lucky for Daphne and her friend were in and they were delighted at the idea of John coming over with his friend.

“ You see,” Daphne said over the phone, “ Pen—that’s my girl friend—she’s going on a world cruise next week and this is our last week-end together. We were just dying to go out, but what can two girls do, bumming around town all by ourselves ? ”

“ Well—that’s dandy. We’ll be over soon—gallant escorts for you—good night—sweetheart.”

When John returned, he looked a more cheerful man. “ Come on—big boy. I’ve fixed something that’s really dandy. Just jakerloo.”

Almost without a word Arthur got up, ready to go. John hardly ever spoke like that.

But today everything was abnormal, and who cared what one said when they were out to paint the town red.

They paid their bill and in the taxi John made a short introductory speech for Arthur's benefit. Then Arthur knew and silently acknowledged how much superior his companion was in these affairs of the world and how much more subtle was John's approach to women. There was a lot Arthur had yet to learn, and he appreciated for the first time that philandering was a fine art, acquired after some practice and much perseverance. *Chassez la femme*—the French said. And somehow it did not sound so unpleasant as its Anglo-Saxon equivalent, and '*faire l'amour*' was so much better than its colloquial Scotch. The English public school could never teach you all that.

The cold air of the night went to John's head. Normally he could put down a fairish quantity of alcohol without turning a hair, but today his mind was tired and his stomach empty, and whatever little he had to drink went to his head. But he was not drunk—far from it. He had only got to the point where his sense of responsibility had completely deserted him, and life became pleasantly agreeable. He was feeling so generous, he tipped the cabman half-a-crown as they stepped out in front of a green door in Upper Berkeley Street. When they rang the bell, Daphne and Pen looked out of the window and flung down the key.

To these two girls the presence of two young men was very welcome. It relieved the tension between them, for Pen was shortly leaving and their *ménage* which had been quite successful would break up. Now Daphne would be all by herself and it had happened so very suddenly. After that troublesome evening with the Comte de Baroque, who really did want to rush things with a haste which was almost indecent, Pen had anxiously looked forward to the evening with Tony. It was a great success, so she told Daphne later, for when Tony laid eyes on the black Chinese letters, he was touched by Pen's thoughtfulness. In a moment of weakness he had asked her to come with him cruising round the world and Pen had jumped at the invitation. She was so thrilled that she showed her gratitude by giving herself up to him—mentally—physically—sexually.

The boys came up. Pen always thought of them as boys. The first introductions were not so successful, for Arthur had by now completely lost his nerve and would not speak much to Pen, who frightened him, and Pen thought Arthur was a schoolboy anyway and not worth wasting a whole night on. Daphne and John were in their hearts longing to spring to each other's arms, if only the others would get a little better acquainted.

"There isn't a drink in the house.", said Pen after an awkward quarter of an hour.

John took the hint and suggested it was time

to step out, for it was a quarter after midnight and things must have warmed up nicely at the *Green Eye*. "*The Green Eye?*", Pen asked, "but can you get in?"

"You didn't think I suggested sitting on the pavement outside, did you?"

Pen laughed, but she was utterly crushed.

John was always blunt to women who asked stupid questions and in trying to be clever Pen sometimes did say the most absurd things. But Pen liked John for the mild snub he had given her. She realized he was no schoolboy.

"Come on, boys and girls", Pen came closer to John and said with half-shut eyes, "you know your London all right." And John acknowledged the compliment and smiled. "Not so bad," he thought. Yes, Pen had distinct possibilities.

"I say," said Arthur, "Is it all right going to the *Green Eye*. Won't be raided, will it? Hate to see my name in the papers."

Neither John nor Pen replied. They pretended not to have heard Arthur's putrid inquiry. They looked at each other and confirmed their dislike for him. Only Daphne was polite enough to allay Arthur's fears. She could not be rude like the rest.

"Oh no!" Daphne said, "I've been there before. It is not so hideous as it sounds."

"Of course, you never can say," John said with obvious delight and Pen chuckled. Daphne did

not laugh. She did not think it fair to bully a baby and Arthur was a baby. He touched the maternal instinct in Daph. And so, before they had left the flat in Upper Berkeley Street, there was already a slight shuffle of the pack. John had gone over to Pen, who understood him better and Daphne gave Arthur the protection he needed.

At the *Green Eye* this pairing off became more evident. Pen and John danced together most of the time, and when they did, Daphne noticed there was so little space between them. It must have been quite warm dancing like that. If Daphne had ever cared for John, he repulsed her now and Arthur had that place in her affections. Arthur was a gentleman, Daphne thought, the type that would never do a woman wrong. And when they danced together, it was in their own clean way, looking into each other's eyes and blushing slightly at their mutual attraction. First it had begun with pity—pity for the weaker man. Then she started to like him. Now even his body was calling her—but she hesitated to respond.

On the dance floor, Pen and John were getting closer to each other. John broke the long silence. "So you are shortly leaving England."

"Uh-huh," Pen replied."

"When?"

"Monday."

"So soon?"

“ Yes.”

“ Pity.”

“ Why ? ”

“ I don't know . . . what do you think ? ”

“ Well . . .”, Pen raised her shoulders. Then she pressed closer to John, clung tighter to his arm, dug her nails into his flesh, bit her lip, took a deep breath, closed her eyes. Very clever, John thought, very clever, as they returned to their table.

John was a popular customer at the *Green Eye*. He did not come there often, but when he did, he made a night of it. He tipped well and they flocked to serve him. It was worth their while. He always drank champagne. Insisted on Mumm 1921, though it was scarce, not because he wanted to be regarded as esoteric, but because he enjoyed it. That was one thing for which he was grateful to his father—this inherited taste for good wine.

The four talked to each other very politely. They were all happy and Daphne now liked Arthur so much, she was quite reconciled to the idea that Pen had pinched her boy friend. Nothing worried Pen. Not even her conscience. She was getting marvellously drunk on good champagne and with every glass became more and more dangerously attractive. As for Arthur he was in a state of perfect bliss, partly due to the drink, partly because of Daphne. His conscience occasionally

worried him, for Daphne was after all John's girl, but when he saw that John neither looked nor cared, his conscience became considerably lighter.

The Green Eye was one of those sinister-looking places tucked in the back streets of Soho. Everything was green—from the roof down to the floor and little eyes were painted on the walls—fiendish eyes—sleepy eyes—soft, seductive eyes. The waiters, the band, the cigarette-girls—they were all dressed in green. At two o'clock, the cabaret was announced. The little dance-floor was cleared and three dark men from the States broke out into rythm. Scat-singers, they called themselves. Wa-da-da! Wa-di-da-wa-di-da-daah! They did this for a quarter of an hour on end for which they collected some seventy pounds a week. A neat little sum it was. And everyone joined in the chorus of da-da-da's. There was tremendous applause when each number finished and from the odd corners of the room they cried for more.

Arthur had enjoyed it all. It was good entertainment, but this early morning London life was new to him. He had never kept such late hours. It began to tell on him and he constantly apologized for yawning. Daphne too was getting tired. She had had enough, but John and Pen were determined to see it through and return home only with the dawn.

"Listen, Pen," Daphne said, taking the initia-

tive, "you and John stay on. Arthur will see me home. We are both rather tired."

"Oh no, you can't do that," John protested.

"Let them go. I don't care," said Pen, unconcerned. Her eyes were goofy and the effects of wine were setting in.

"I think we better," Daphne said, looking appealingly at Arthur, "you don't mind?" And Arthur smiled. It was a victor's smile.

They got up, said polite good-byes to each other and when Arthur shook hands with John he discreetly slipped a fiver into his hands. It was Arthur's share of the party, though it was a generous share. For Arthur it had been a perfect evening and he was only too glad to pay for it. Neither of the girls saw that a financial transaction had taken place.

In the cab Daphne sat close to Arthur and after a while he put his arm round her. Occasionally the light from street-lamps threw a glow on her beautiful face. And Arthur smiled each time he got a glimpse of her.

"It's been a perfect evening," Daphne said.

"Yes, perfect."

"For the two of us."

"Yes, Daphne....may I see you again.... sometime?"

"Do you want to?"

"Of course I want to." He came close to her. She felt a little wave of electricity run through her

whole body. She knew she was in love again.

"I'll always be glad to see you," she said.

"Tomorrow then?"

She nodded.

"I'll call for you at seven."

There was one of those awkward pauses. A sort of breath-taking pause, quite common when boy meets girl in a London cab. Then he drew her closer to himself and in her ears whispered: "I love you, Daphne. I love you."

Daphne liked to hear these words. It was so long since she had heard anything so tender. She did not reply but merely lifted her face. Lips invited lips, and in the silence which followed love was born. So they thought—these two children groping in the dark. At the doorstep of Daphne's house he wished her good-night, and when he jumped back into the cab he noticed that Daphne had left a trail of sweet-smelling perfume behind her. How beautiful life can be, Arthur thought when he tucked himself under his sheets that night.

At the *Green Eye*, Pen and John were sitting on the top of the world. John ordered another bottle of champagne—the fourth of the evening. They had already reached a high degree of intoxication, but now they were determined to soak in that same good wine.

"So you are going away?" John asked all over again.

"I'm afraid so," Pen repeated.

"Pity", he said, "pity."

Pen also began to feel that it was a pity. But Monday was such a long way off. There was a whole day in between. And a whole day in London can be a very long time.

"Let's go," Pen said after a while when their conversation had dried up and they could only speak in the language of eyes.

"Where to?"

"Anywhere you like."

"Shall we?"

"Yes."

"All right," John said. He called for the waiter and asked for his bill. From his pocket he pulled out two brand new five pound notes, one of which was Arthur's, and asked the waiter to keep the change, which was well over a pound.

They got out into the open air. It was just five-thirty and the sky was no longer studded with stars. They walked arm-in-arm along the narrow street towards Shaftesbury Avenue.

"Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere you like."

"Unfortunately I am staying at my Club and have no rooms of my own," John lied. He was too ashamed to take her back to his mean lodgings.

"Come to our place—if you promise to be quiet."

John was gradually sobering down. The change from the mysterious green light of the *Green Eye*

to the first glow of dawn brought him back to consciousness. When he saw her in that grey morning light he noticed she looked old and haggard and he knew her body would probably bulge in places where it should not. Her breasts probably sagged, John thought, for what life there must have been had been sucked out of them. The thought repulsed him and he would not have her because she had made herself so easily accessible. There was really no difference between Pen and the women whose telephone numbers Arthur carried in his breast-pocket. Those women at least were honest and unashamed about their profession, John confessed to himself, as he shook Pen off his hands. But Pen and her kind left a taste in your mouth—till you gargled next morning with Dettol.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

MANY days passed and John found himself installed in Bloomsbury. He had by now taken stock of himself. He soon realized he must give up blowing fivers like fireworks in the night or else he must pack up his stuff, go back to Galford Park and beg for terms. He would rather starve than surrender to his father. The financial problem was, however, beginning to get acute. He had some money with him, but the pace he was cracking, attempting to drown his feelings in wine and women, had dwindled what money he had brought with him. There was only his gold cigarette case to fall back upon. It had its pawn value and the price of gold was soaring higher every day.

John had tried hard to get a living wage, but from everywhere the answer was the same. The depression was not yet over and to take new men when they were sacking the old, was against the principles of most employers. Besides, the men in the City had their own views on young

men from Oxford. They mistook culture for pure downright swank, they thought pacifists were shallow and an aesthete was another name for a pansy. The City much preferred overgrown schoolboys from the lesser known universities.

There was yet an avenue John had left unexplored. It was the avenue in which the stories of the world were printed, and where news flashed on tapes that came out from an automatic machine. Fleet Street—cold-blooded and ghastly, where London worked night and day manufacturing news. News—hot news—war, murder, and “x” marking the spot where the shot was fired. Sometimes when it fell short of real news, it had even resorted to drawing conclusions from ominous silences. This was called “journalism” and there were schools in London to teach you how to draw blood out of stone. Every scrap of writing from the agony column to the leader page, from sports to politics, from City news to births and *in memoriam*, had as its touchstone that elusive, undefinable something which in the language of the Features Editor was called “human interest.” These Features Editors were the sole judges of what was and what was not of human interest and there was no higher tribunal of appeal from their autocratic decisions. There were, therefore, many stories, which were human, which never found their way into the columns of the London

press and there were many people of whom the world never heard because a Features Editor had found in them no human interest.

Mr. Pimlico's was a case in point. To the Mrs. Thurlow, who symbolized the great newspaper-reading public of England, there was nothing in Mr. Pimlico's life to merit even a quarter column in any of the London dailies. After all, thought Mrs. Thurlow, and the two million other Mrs. Thurlows, for whom a Features Editor catered, Mr. Pimlico had not yet been murdered, nor had he, to their knowledge, been caught red-handed by a jealous husband making love to his wife. In fact he was not a well-known and celebrated figure in London circles. He was not even a father of quintuplets. The only sinister thing about him was his evening dress, which was slightly beyond the ken of Tavistock Square. But what was an evening suit in a sophisticated metropolis?

The days were getting shorter and the dark shadows of the evening spread like a pall on London. John was beginning to spend more and more time in his cheap lodgings, working on a few short stories which were his first efforts at fiction, and on articles by which he thought, he might be able to enlighten those feverish seekers after knowledge, those insignificant little people, who reared families and waded through the pages of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

One evening there was a knock at his door and

when John looked up from his papers, the sleek figure of Eric Pimlico was standing in the open doorway. In one hand he carried a turkish bath-towel, in another an elaborate sponge-bag with several aids to beauty to which an "actor" must necessarily resort. Mr. Pimlico was on his way to his bath, to wash away the sleep and the black marks of dissipation from under his eyes, to remove the growth of thick black hair from his long face, and to stretch the skin which was tending to slacken on his angular features.

It was a friendly visit, quite informal and no doubt prompted by Mrs. Thurlow, who had remarked about the lonesome existence of the new gentleman on the first floor. Mr. Pimlico had taken little notice of her appeal but today he felt a strong urge to help his lonely fellowman, towards whom the world was not so kind. A streak of pity, you may call it. A moment of weakness. A determined effort to suppress the insufferable ego. Whatever it was Eric Pimlico stood at the threshold of John's habitation or as the sentimental biographers would have said "crossed his path." He introduced himself, apologized for his presence in "négligé," and emphasized the social aspect of his informal visit.

"Well it's very nice of you to have looked in. Do sit down," John said.

"Thanks," said Mr. Pimlico, shutting the door behind him.

"Have a cigarette?" John asked, opening the cigarette case with which he had not yet parted.

Mr. Pimlico's eyes sparkled at the sight of this lovely case. He had often seen things like these in the show cases of expensive Bond Street shops, but he had never handled one, nor did he believe there were people in Tavistock Square who could afford such a luxury. But he said nothing that would show he had not seen a gold cigarette case before. He merely took a cigarette from the case, lit it and drew a couple of large puffs, which he exhaled in the shape of well-formed rings. It was typical of the man.

"Depressing sort of weather," Mr. Pimlico finally said.

"Yes, it's foul. But I don't mind. It reduces the temptation to go out. "

"And it's cheaper. I find it so. That's why I stay in bed all day."

"Yes, but you work late don't you ? "

"In a way, yes," Mr. Pimlico replied.

"What does it feel like to turn night into day ? "

"One gets used to it. One can get used to almost anything after a while."

"I know. I am beginning to find that out," John remarked.

"Out of a job ? "

"No, not quite—never had one."

"Lucky man."

"Unfortunately not," John replied.

“ Why ? ”

“ Because it is so demoralizing.”

“ But you write all day. That’s work enough.”

“ But it has to sell before it can be classed as work.”

“ What sort of stuff is it ? ”

“ I really don’t know. I am going to have a shot at Fleet Street, and I want to have something with me that I can show.

“ To write well, you must go out more. See more of life. Sophisticated people. Shallow people. The muck and scum of life. The nice people.”

“ But where do you find all these clustered together ? ” John inquired.

“ I do.”

“ But where ? ”

“ I work in a restaurant, my job is to entertain people. To fix lonesome men up with obliging partners. To cart fat women round the room and pour ‘sweet’ things into their great, big, gorgeous ears. I don’t like it, but there it is. There is little else in life I am fit for.”

“ A restaurant host ? Its not so bad.”

“ Well—that’s a polite word for it. Still it keeps me in food, finds my daily packet of cigarettes, and I am sure of a roof to sleep under.”

“ Where do you work ? ”

“ At the Traubador, Jermyn Street.”

“ Smart place ? ”

"Smart, yes in a way. Lots of rich people but it's a *nouveau riche* crowd. People who are impressed because they haven't seen very much of life and have suddenly found their bank balance bolstered up with a few wins on horses or a flutter in the City. It draws a lot of foreigners too because the food's good and we keep twelve dancing partners, which is more than the other places can boast of."

"Twelve girls? Do they find enough work?"

"You'd be surprised. They pick up a quid or two every night."

"That's more than I can do," John plaintively admitted.

"Come round some day. I'll....."

"No, thanks. I have been spending quite a lot of money lately. Can't afford any more at the moment."

"But you won't have to spend at all. I'll arrange it so when you come. Bring a girl if you like. Or if you are alone, I'll fix you up. No charge for services rendered!"

"Thanks, it is very nice of you. I will, sometime. Only at the moment I'm so desperately wanting to get a footing somewhere. You see I've broken from my people. I am all on my own and I haven't very much left to go on."

"If it is as bad as that, come and have a meal on me when you want."

"Thanks. I'll keep it for a rainy day. The

way things are moving there will soon be dark clouds in the sky."

"Oh come, come. Not so pessimistic. Go out and enjoy yourself, man. Get hardened and you'll succeed," Mr. Pimlico said.

"Perhaps you're right."

"I must go now. Bath, shave, lots of things to do. And I have to be at my job in an hour's time."

"Thanks for coming. Look in again. Anytime you like."

"I will," said Mr. Pimlico, gathering his pale-blue dressing gown with his initials embroidered on the breast-pocket around him and tightening the long, silk sash round his sleek waist.

Some thirty minutes later he jumped into the nearest tube and bought a ticket for Piccadilly.

The Troubadour was somewhere in the middle of Jermyn Street. It was full of soft lights and clouds of smoke, of expensive women with jewellery and *demi-mondes* with junk. Caviar. Sausages. There were tables set for two.

Mr. Pimlico at the Troubadour was always an immaculately dressed man with a clean shirt, a clean tie and a white gardenia in his buttonhole. No one would say he was just a gigolo, who was so hungry inside. At his table they always put an empty bottle of champagne in a large pale of ice. False pretences, like everything else around him. For whole hours he would gaze at the door. Couples. Loving couples. What use were they?

They could not stop the rumbling inside.

A pound a week and whatever else he could find. Hard work. Tired feet. Shoes re-soled. Dancing, dancing all the time. That was his life, his only hope.

At table 16, there was a party of three with one elderly lady with a gentle smile. She once called the head-waiter. Whispers were exchanged. Hopeful gigolo! A few minutes elapsed, Patient gigolo. The instructions arrived. "Table 16."

He straightened up. Adjusted his tie. Put out the cigarette end. Where duty calls, he goes. He was greeted. So courteous. So it always began. They danced.

He saw her closely. She was rich and gaudy. Buckled in harness. Her thick silk dress stretched across her ample bosoms. Her dyed hair showed at the roots. The eyes were heavy-laden with wrinkles. Large earrings. Her red chest was emblazoned with sapphires. Vile body. It always is.

They rocked in rhythm. They danced out of time. Stratopygia. He tried to flatter. She was shy and coy. He appeared enchanted. Fascinated. He looked into her eyes. Daring. So subtle. Clever gigolo.

He joined their table. Politeness. So artificial. A drink? Wine flowed. Food in abundance. A sandwich! Loving looks and bewitching smiles. How inviting. Yet not sustaining for an empty

stomach. Famished gigolo.

They danced again. Again. Life went on smooth. Soft. Rhythmic. So like the music. The saxophone bellowed. The piano tinkled. The strum of the banjo. The beat of the drum. That never ceasing throbbing. Passion. She clung to him. Desperately. As if to her last hope in life.

She gazed into his eyes. Searching unfathomed depths. Glorious visions. Dreams of love. Romance. Yet was it only a mirage? He gazed back. Faded lights. Eyes that had lost their spark. Shallow depths. Just a chest of gold.

The music stopped. Their dance had ceased. Disdainful looks. Poor gigolo. So bewildered. So alone. The touch of a soft thigh. Warm flesh. Rejuvenated. Not so alone. Under the table, a clammy hand. Fat. Perspiring. He shirked at first. Then smiled. He gave way. He clasped her hand. His fingers grazed the massive stones. The gold settings. Her diamond rings. What price glory? What price? Any price.

'Twas late. Long past the hour of midnight. The party was over. Cloakrooms. The men waited in silence. Once more he felt alone. Cold looks. Contempt. Disgusted gentleman.

Two men! Worlds apart. One—middle-aged, successful, complacent, aloof—a gentleman. The other—young, struggling, restless, shunned—a

social renegade. Two men ! Same world.

The ladies re-appeared. They were cloaked. Ermine. Chinchilla. Mink. Who knows ? 'Twas good-bye. They shook hands. Good-bye.

Slowly he walked back to his table. In the palm of his hand the paper rustled. Five pound note !!! God ! Generosity. Kind woman. So understanding. So rare. But his work was not yet done. On the back he read the pencilled writing. Her Mayfair address, the hour, the day. 'Twas not far from now. Hopeless gigolo.

Abruptly he got up. He remembered. His girl was waiting outside. Poor Betty ! From the third row of the chorus. So cold, so tired, so lonely. 'Twas raining. In the alley by the entrance she waited till he came. He kissed her. Little hands, so soft. Little girl so young. Mass of curls. Blonde. Scarlet lips and such blue, blue eyes. All on fire ! What price beauty ?

Now it drizzled. They walked arm in arm. She was happy. Was he ? He felt her threadbare coat. By the street lamp he stopped. He looked at her again. Shabby hat. Worn-out shoes.

Dirty London. Black soot. Black fog. Black night. Sewers ran underneath. Dusty shoes walked the street. Such filth. Crazy people. Now a million made. Such joys. So many pleasures. Now broke. Friends were gone. So much sorrow. Such regrets. Wasted lives. Only

money mattered.

They stopped at the coffee stall. Cups of coffee. Hot dogs and veal pies. Food. Warmth. Nourishment. So cheap. Such simple lives. Ordinary people. She lent on him. Her only support. Her locks of hair grazed his shaven chin. She longed for home.

He thought . Deep thought. New clothes for Betty. He saw it all. Shoes must be changed. New hat. A little wave for curly locks. A decent meal. A little life. Good God ! It must be done. Spring shall be here.

The bus arrived. Balham. Clapham. Streatham. The conductor shouted. She jumped on. He stayed behind. "Darling, I have work to do." Duty calls. She never asked the reason why. A sad good-night. Wistful eyes. So resigned. The bus drove on. He waved good-bye.

Taxi ! To Mayfair. He jumped inside. Two men in one. A gentleman. A gigolo. The cabman made no extra charge.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

AT Galford Park it looked as if there had been a death in the family. It seemed so empty, and a strange sadness tinged the atmosphere. Little had been said, for when Mr. Sommerville returned on Friday evening, he had merely announced that John would soon be leaving Oxford. But where John was going or what had happened between father and son, Ronald did not say. All through dinner there was a grim silence. Only at the very end, he turned round to Emma and said : "Emma, from tomorrow you need only lay three places," and when she did not reply, he raised his voice and said: "Did you hear me, Emma?"

"Yes, sir. I did," she hastily replied. She was trembling.

"That will be all." and he pushed his chair away and left the table.

For days nobody said anything at the dinner table and neither Mrs. Sommerville nor Anne thought it wise to broach the subject. Weeks passed and they noticed a strange look in Mr.

Sommerville's face. He looked like a man who was very ill. More than once when he sat alone in his armchair in the library, he would put his head in his hands but say nothing. As he lit his pipe, his hands would shake. Sometimes his teeth would chatter. Even his intimate friends remarked that he was not quite himself.

There was now no letter to look forward to at breakfast nor any news of John. Anne felt his absence more than her parents and the thought that she was powerless to help him made her hate herself. But often when she thought of him, struggling for his independence, she was glad he had decided to face life on his own. Whatever else it might do to him, it would make a man of him—a man such as she would like him to be—a man with ideals, a man of promise, a man of this generation. There was only one doubt in her mind, for she wondered whether he would stay the course.

Mrs. Sommerville's reactions varied with her feelings, for she was torn between her maternal instinct and her sense of discipline. Only when she was all alone, she would shed a tear or breathe a sigh and there would be a choking sensation in her throat. One thing she would never do. She would never make her husband feel that what he had done had hurt her feelings.

There was no explanation given for John's absence. Only the Warden of John's College

knew the whole truth and his only comment had been that he was not in a position to pass judgment on what was a purely personal affair between father and son.

No one was given any satisfactory reason for John's disappearance from Oxford on the eve of a sure first. Those who were imaginative had interpreted things in their own way but they were all convinced, even as Mr. Sommerville was, that the break was only temporary and time would bridge the gulf and that, when John's financial resources were exhausted he would begin to see light and come back to reason. And so Mr. Sommerville lived from day to day regarding this incident as a blessing in disguise.

Several important events, however, took place after John disappeared. Although Mr. Sommerville had for many years retired from active business, he had been approached several times by his more intimate friends to make his massive fortune available for some of their enterprises. He had recently saved two important firms in the City from going into bankruptcy. His timely help had saved thousands of people from being thrown out of work and he was amply rewarded, for the tide had turned and he had been repaid with interest what he lent. These successes made him venture out on new schemes. He started playing with new toys. The paper-weights on his table were one day replaced by slabs of

gun-metal and shells of all sizes. They were all so brilliantly polished and stood in a row on the large oak table in his study where he did his work. But no one in the house had seen any significance in these new toys and when Mrs. Sommerville once remarked: "Don't they look sweet?", he nodded his head in approval.

Meanwhile, those dark clouds of China and Abyssinia had gathered on the horizon of Europe and a few people were beginning to sniff war. From the boiling cauldron came whiffs of poison gas. There was Hitler goose-stepping out of sheer restlessness. He had marched into the Rhineland and torn up the Treaty of Versailles into little shreds, and German militarism was at fever pitch, and they said that where they once made perambulators, they now made guns. In Italy, Mussolini had been offering bonuses to mothers to induce them to procure more children, and he had now stepped into Abyssinia to build creches for those newly-born babies and to teach little black boys to croon the nursery rhymes of the Fascist militia. And where the statue of Caesar had once stood, he had supplanted his own.

All over the face of Europe megalomaniacs marched in steel-helmets, and even in England pocket-editions of dictators led brainless hordes of brawny men dressed in black shirts and bearing the initials B. F., through the open spaces of Trafalgar Square. Something was happening to

this world, of which one knew but little. This *delirium tremens* which had seized the world, was spreading like a plague and storm-troops were jew-baiting as if they were victims of hydrophobia and just had to bite. People in Europe were living partly in the shelter of lunatic asylums, partly in the shadow of concentration camps. But there was another sight that was yet in store for us. The sacrifice of 1914 had not appeased the blood thirst of Mars and man was preparing another feast for him on a more elaborate scale. More blood would flow down the rivers of the world—the Yang-tse, the Danube, the Seine, the Thames—and civilisation was equipping itself for this feast with more cannon fodder, with more little children to crucify at the altar of destructive science.

One day there would come the *millennium*, which man had so long been promised, but before that, in every village of Europe, sculptors would be working on new war-memorials and armistice day would have to fall more than once a year. They fell for King and Country, we would say. Yes, King and Country. And as the Romans said: "*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*", so that those who survived would march back triumphantly into the land fit for heroes to live in. Poor fools! God, forgive them for they know not what they do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ARTHUR had taken his first meeting with Daphne somewhat seriously. First-love had penetrated deeper than the alcohol, and when he got up in the morning, he had banished such low desires as he may have felt rising within him the night before. It was a case of 'Get thee behind, Satan.'

Punctually he had turned up at seven to keep the appointment with Daphne, which he had made in the taxi on their way back from the *Green Eye*. But it was a different Arthur Marsden that stood outside the door of the house in Upper Berkeley Street from the Arthur Marsden John knew, for now Arthur's intentions were strictly honourable and as a tribute to the purity of the love he bore Daphne, he had torn up his little book of telephone numbers.

So their little episode began. They ate, they drank, they kept on looking hungrily into each other's eyes. They laughed, they smiled, they walked into the night. Through rain, storm, fog, they cuddled close to each other, defying the

elements. They talked of the future. They looked at advertisements for houses for sale. They looked at little children that crossed their path. They whispered sweet things to each other. It sure was love.

At Waterloo station, a large crowd had gathered to see Pen and Tony leave on their world cruise. Tony had a wide circle of acquaintances, who popped bottles of champagne on the platform in return for Tony's lavish entertainment on so many occasions. Daphne and Arthur were also present, but how they hated this ostentatious display of wealth.

Pen had left on her tramping round the world.—a tramp-de-luxe, such as she had always dreamt of. She felt she had done her bit in life. She had given so much to so many men, that now she was determined to get something back, and it seemed as if Tony had been sent by God in answer to a maiden's prayer.

Now that Pen was gone, Daphne had the whole flat to herself. It was very useful, for she could entertain Arthur whenever she wanted, and no one was any the wiser. As days went by, Arthur began to see her more often. At first he came once a week and left at midnight. Then it became twice a week and he would leave even later. And when term was over at Oxford and he got to know her really well, he came nearly every day and stayed till the early hours of the morning.

One week-end he told his family he was going to see John. He didn't, for he spent every minute of it with Daphne. They kissed, they cuddled, they rolled on the floor, locked in each other's arms. And when this perfect bliss was over he asked her: "Any regret, darling?"

"No, my sweet. I was never so happy before."

"Oh! Darling."

"Darling."

Satan had not lagged behind, and in their little Garden of Eden they had tasted the fruit of the forbidden tree. It was not for Daphne the first bite, but it was her first real affair. She liked it and asked for more. It was all so heavenly while it lasted.

It was a few weeks later that she realized something had gone wrong. She began to get a little afraid, but she kept it to herself. She became irritable, nervous and she cried when by herself. In the end, tormented by fear, she secretly consulted a Harley street physician, who confirmed her worst suspicions. The maternal instinct in her was beginning to take shape, and she fainted when she heard the news. The doctor was sympathetic, for he had handled cases like this before and the moral he preached to the young things that came to him was that a little knowledge was a dangerous thing.

Daphne took a taxi and went straight home. For days she lived in the hope that something

might yet happen. One evening when she dined out with Arthur she got vulgarly drunk. She became hysterical. There was a scene and she was carried out. It was one of those mortifying experiences one never forgets. He took her to the flat, carried her up the stairs, with the help of the cabman who lent a hand, and in utter disgust he sat there waiting for her to come round.

When she got out of her unconscious stupor, he sat beside her on the bed and reproachfully said :
“ Why did you do that, Daph ? ”

“ Oh ! I don’t know....darling....darling.. ”

He did not respond to her affection. It would take long to live down the humiliation he had suffered in the presence of waiters and strangers, who were dining at the tables next to him and who expressed their disgust in no mild form.

“ Don’t darling me,” he abruptly said.

“ Sorry, Arthur, I didn’t know what I was doing. I am sorry.”

“ I told you, you couldn’t stand all that drink. No, you wouldn’t listen. Made me look a damned fool too.”

“ Don’t, Arthur, you don’t know..... ”

“ I don’t want to know.”

“ If only.... ”

“ Oh ! Shut up, you drunken twirt.”

She did not reply. She buried her head in the pillows and cried. Arthur rose to go to the window. He felt the need of fresh air. With

his back turned he added: "When you've stopped being hysterical let me know."

"Arthur...darling...darling," she cried louder.

"You'll wake up everybody in the house."

"I don't care."

Arthur felt more embarrassed. Daphne's wailing was getting louder and he hated the idea of another scene in case the people in the flat above rushed downstairs hearing Daphne cry. So he closed the window and came nearer her.

"What is it?"

"Listen, darling, you must know," Daphne said, crying.

"What is it?"

"I didn't get drunk for nothing...."

"No? Then why?"

"You know that week-end you spent with me."

"Yes."

"Well..."

"Well, what?"

"It was heavenly, darling. And I don't regret what happened...but...the worst has happened."

For a few moments Arthur was too dazed to realize what it was all about. The shock had muted him. His mind went blank and a cold sweat ran down his back. After he recovered, he said in a very restrained voice: "Are you sure? How do you know?"

"I had myself examined the other day."

"By whom?"

"I went to a man in Harley Street."

"Can't anything be done?"

"Nothing that would not be dangerous."

"Well....."

"Don't worry, darling. I don't care, so long as I know you love me."

"This is no time for love. We must do some quick thinking."

Arthur got suddenly emotional. He leant over and kissed her affectionately but without passion, for what he felt was not love. It was pity.

His love for Daphne had chilled at the thought that through her clumsy inexperience, he had to face the dilemma of a premature marriage prompted solely by his code of honour or be labelled by society as the cowardly father of an unwanted child. It was a difficult situation for a young man to find himself in—more so because he was still at Oxford, and due to take "schools" in eight weeks. It was impossible to face his examiners in such an unsettled frame of mind. The one redeeming feature of what might otherwise have been a sordid episode was that Daphne with her sophistication and her somewhat liberal education was the type of woman Arthur would not be ashamed to own as his wife. In fact, in his protestations of love, he had been quite sincere and it was merely the shock of being a father overnight that had shaken his equanimity.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IN three weeks John collected a reasonable quantity of what he believed was saleable journalism. There were three short stories taken almost from life in which living people featured. There was Mr. Pimlico in his top-hat, white tie and tails, there was Pen—adorable Pen Warrington in her corsets, and there was the public-school boy, Arthur Marsden. There was little doubt in John's mind that these 'living' creatures, whom he had seen, felt and touched with his hands had their own human interest, for they were people through whose life ran a strain of tragedy, which never came out on the surface except in the form of a deceptive smile. They sheltered behind that perpetual grin, which was their one solitary defence against the unkindness of this world.

John had also written three serious articles on some of the most important phases of modern life. There was a brilliant attack on Fascism, dealing with every aspect of the problem from Jew-baiting to Imperial expansion which Fascists

called 'the problem of living space.' There was a very human piece of writing which John had entitled: "An Apology for Pacifism"—the sort of writing that came straight from the heart and which was dignified in its vituperation. For the third, he had chosen a completely extraneous subject. The theme itself was old and hackneyed and had been thrashed out by many writers before him, but John had an angle of approach that was entirely new. He had called it "Coloured Men—Are they Human?".

With this quantity of type-written matter, which was of his own creation, he went to Fleet Street to sell his wares. He jumped out of the bus at the door-step of the *Daily Chronicle*, a paper with a daily circulation well over the two-million mark and which had the most brilliant feature-writers in Fleet street or elsewhere. John had chosen the *Daily Chronicle* because he had met Jeremy Baldon, the Features Editor, at a sherry party at Oxford. It was in fact given in Mr. Baldon's honour by some of the younger undergraduate journalists. John had been introduced to him as a promising young man and this shrewd Features Editor did not take long to be convinced of that promise. After a short conversation, Baldon had of his own accord asked John to walk into his office anytime John happened to be in London and wished to do so. It was an invitation too good to be accepted. But now

circumstances had changed and before John approached anyone else in Fleet Street, it was, he felt, easier to call on Mr. Baldon, whom he had met at least once before. In a world full of strangers that little acquaintanceship of a brief quarter of an hour made a world of difference. It was like finding a friend on a desert island.

John sent in his name and as his address he gave his Oxford College, though it was now a thing of the past and he had no right to it. He waited along with several other people in a common waiting-room. There was so much in the faces of these men and women who were waiting—always waiting for something to happen. There was something dishevelled about them, though their hair was neatly parted and their ties and collars and their dress quite spick and span. But something inside them was dishevelled, something in their very lives that was ruffled. Here, thought John, were stories that needed no writing by any creative genius. They were stories that told themselves. In the silence of that waiting-room they seemed to shout their woes and to shriek in agony the sorrows that were inside them. Yet there were the stories which never got published. The Features Editor had probably “killed” them, for the lack of that something they were in reality so full of—human interest.

Twenty minutes elapsed and nothing happened. The page boy, who had run upstairs with the slip of

paper bearing John's name, asked John to wait along with the others. He would be attended to, if and when possible.

Later when his turn came, a little girl in a yellow jersey and a dark brown skirt, young, efficient, very unassuming, arrived and inquired for the person, who answered to the name of John Sommerville. She was Secretary to the Features Editor and like all secretaries, she informed the visitor that the Editor was, like all editors, extremely busy, and she inquired whether, in view of these circumstances, there was anything that she could do in the matter.

"When is he likely to be free?", John inquired.

"I am afraid he is always busy. Very busy."

John smiled at her gallant effort to stand by her chief and to convince the stranger of the truth of her statement. It was like the proverbial guide who repeated a doubtful detail twice, to convince the tourist of its authenticity.

"That is all right," John smiled, "I should never have bothered him. Only when I met him at Oxford he asked me of his own accord to come round and see him anytime I wished. I was only taking him at his word. Perhaps I was mistaken. I am sorry. Good-bye."

With this John picked up his hat and made a move to go.

"Just a minute Mr.....eh," she looked at

the slip of paper, "Mr. Sommerville, if you will wait a moment I will go and see him again. I am sure there must be some mistake in my instructions."

"That's perfectly all right. Why do you bother about it? After all I hate to disturb a busy man."

That she was gifted with tact soon became apparent. She gulped John's sarcasm and his short temper without a murmur. Very gently she replied: "Please, Mr. Sommerville. I know how you must hate this evasion. I have to do it every day, and I feel so small to think that a paper like ours should ever send an individual back through its front door without having done what a paper can do, but does not want to. But I am a very small person, in fact just an echo of my master's voice. So won't you wait, just a few moments?"

John did not reply. Staggered by her utter frankness, all he could do was to look at her blankly for a while, and then return to the waiting-room to sit with the rest of the people, who were still waiting.

Very soon the young woman with the yellow jersey and the brown skirt returned. She was almost out of breath but there was a look of triumph on her face, and she seemed to say, though not in so many words that the wheels of the machinery, the whole organization of the

mighty press had been arrested, if only to make it possible for the busy Features Editor to see John Sommerville. She led the way to his office. John meekly followed behind her, hugging his bundle of papers which he had tucked firmly under his arm.

John was ushered into the holy of holies, and the young woman with the yellow jersey and brown skirt announced him into the presence of Mr. Baldon, Features Editor, of the *Daily Chronicle* Fleet Street, London. "Good afternoon, Mr. Sommerville. Take a chair," Mr. Baldon abruptly said.

"Good afternoon sir," said John, "I hope you will pardon this intrusion. I don't think you remember having met me at Oxford.... —."

"At Oxford? Let me see..."

"I was introduced to you at the party given in your honour and you very kindly suggested that I should come and see you."

"Oh yes...yes..." Mr. Baldon said, shaking his head in affirmation, but it was apparent to John, that the Features Editor had not the vaguest recollection of that meeting.

"I have come to you, sir, with some of my stuff and I shall be very grateful if you could look through it to see if I could be of any use to your paper. It means a lot to me, and I shall appreciate it very much if you can do something in the matter."

Mr. Baldon stroked his chin and though he had heard this sort of appeal from so many other young enthusiasts, he became somewhat uneasy at John's request.

"You see, Mr. Sommerville....eh....I am.... very glad to see you and it is very nice of you to have called on me and of course I shall do everything in the matter, but there is very little scope for young journalists who come to me with really good stuff, stuff which makes me sad to refuse, but often I find there is no other alternative for me. The trouble is that these young men writers of promise have, if I might say so, no name—by which I mean no name which is known to the great public for which we cater. I fully realize that to make a name, one has got to start somewhere, but believe me, a great many of the famous names in journalism have often been made in other spheres. A man may walk into my office straight after winning the open golf championship or at Wimbledon or after a flight across the Atlantic or a woman after having given birth to more than twins. I confess these people haven't the foggiest idea of journalism but I can give them a contract at once, because whatever tripe these people may write, will be lapped up by our two million readers. And so their journalistic careers begin. Very soon you find them writing in the world press on character, sportsmanship, the art of flying, the art of breeding, birth-

control and almost any other subject they can think of. But their names have news-value, and because of that their stories have human interest and that is what we are always looking for—that is what our readers want—human interest. I don't want to discourage you in any way, I just want you to understand what modern journalism means. Leave your stuff with me for a week and I'll see what I can do. What is it by the way ? ”

“ Well, sir, there are three articles in the same style as your feature page and there are three short stories, written in short staccato sentences—something of the short, short story type. Vivid pictures, like a camera recording life at full speed.”

“ I like your salesmanship,” replied Mr. Baldon, “even though I may not like your journalism. What are the articles about ? ”

“ I have called them ‘Fascism on Trial’, ‘An Apology for Pacifism’ ‘Coloured men—are they human ? ’ They deal with these problems.”

“ Yes, yes,” Mr. Baldon interrupted, “but you see these have been overdone. If you look at the question from my point of view, I am the buyer and I have got to think what interest it will have for our two million readers. Our paper goes into the very heart of England and to these people we can only give a certain amount of intellectual matter. Fascism, pacifism, the colour question—these are problems which can only be appreciated by a few.

The English reading public when you begin to count them on the million basis are not like these few. They will tolerate a certain amount of this highbrow stuff, but after that they will just refuse to read any more. And either we must change our feature page and the stuff we dish out day after day or they just stop buying the paper. So I am afraid these articles as such are really of no use to me."

Mr. Baldon stroked his chin again and felt uneasy. He saw the sadness in John's face. Mr. Baldon had seen it so often before in the young faces that had come before him. He had been hardened by them. He looked a successful man who had come to the top of the ladder in spite of circumstances. His own dogged perseverance, his capacity for hard work had seen him through, but he had a grievance, which had never been avenged and he seemed perpetually to be taking his revenge on the world above which he had risen. He was a child of the middle class whose upbringing had been moral and prudish, whose sex life had been repressed and whose every effort at self-expression had been crushed by the environment in which he had been brought up. He looked what he probably was—a hen-pecked husband, whose wife did not believe in birth-control and who in the hay-day of his life was driven to spend his week-ends with an accommodating secretary on the feeble excuse of reducing

his golf handicap John hated to think that the young woman in the yellow jersey and brown skirt was a party to this. Very probably she was not—but the thought had crossed his mind—and Mr. Baldon was the sort of person who would leave no stone unturned, no avenue unexplored. Mr. Baldon was very likely nothing at all like what John had imagined. For all we know he was a very home-loving, peace-abiding citizen, who believed in holy matrimony and the sanctity of married life. These editors can be so deceptive. What wouldn't they do for human interest?

"Now," continued Mr. Baldon, "if you can write something that would appeal to these people—and I don't see why you shouldn't—well, you're set."

"But what could I write on?" John pathetically asked.

"My dear young man, every day before your very eyes, there are thousands of subjects that pass unnoticed, because you haven't kept your eyes sufficiently open. Take for example when you are in a bus or train or tube, better still take a modern hotel. Yes, there is a subject for you. A modern hotel—people passing in and out as in Vicki Baum's Grand hotel—only cut out the dancer stuff and the thieving baron. People would spot them too easily. Rather take the ordinary people that hang round a hotel. Take the people who work behind the scenes. Give some idea of

what goes on in the kitchen before it serves up a delicate dish in the restaurant. A hotel—why it's like Babylon—there is a title for you 'The New Babylon.' Write that."

John pondered for a while on the ideas which Mr. Baldon spouted. As he reflected, he saw the Features Editor pick the little piece of paper which bore John's name. He looked inquiringly at John, then said "John Sommerville? John Sommer-ville," then turning to his secretary said: "Where have I heard that before?"

"I think you are referring to that father and son episode some time ago," the secretary replied.

"Of course," and he switched over to John, "tell me, are you in any way related to the young man, who left Oxford because of his disagreement with his father?"

"Why do you ask that? Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does," Mr. Baldon insisted.

"I am the same person," John quietly said. He blushed when the young thing in the yellow jersey and brown skirt looked over her shoulder to survey him."

"Well, well, well," Mr. Baldon ejaculated with his hands cutting wild semaphores in the air, "why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"What does it matter?"

"What does it matter! Don't you see what I have been telling you all the while. There's your start for you. There's your news-value.

Conflict of generations ! Boy, what a story."

"I don't understand."

"You will. It's easy. Now you just go back and write me what you like on why you left your father. There's your subject. I'll buy it like a shot. Ten guineas for twelve hundred words."

"I am afraid I couldn't do that. I don't think it fair to draw a family squabble into the papers."

"Not fair. What does that matter? Look at the story it would make. If you want to be a journalist you must not think about things in terms of fairness. The one criterion should be news value. You must ask yourself, has this story got any news-value? Has it got any human interest? If it has, go right ahead and publish it. If it hasn't, just kill it."

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Baldon, but there are such things as principles in a young man's life. With years they may fade away, but at the moment they are all I live for. My break from the family was on a matter of principle."

"Don't tell me all that. Go and write it my boy, write it. That's what I want you to do. What a story ! What a story—if you only knew. It's the name Sommerville I want."

"No thank you, Mr. Baldon," and John got up to leave.

"I don't think we see eye to eye on this matter and it is something argument will not alter."

"Have it your own way," Mr. Baldon said in

resignation. He had failed to buy the one story he wanted. As John rose from the chair, his eye fell on the galley proof with thick black surrounding the whole page. It was the black used for deep mourning and rightly so, for in bold letters was written: "The King is dead." Was he? No, for George V, then King of England was still alive, but, Mr. Baldon explained, it was the policy of the paper that everytime the King had the slightest indisposition, the news-editor would immediately inform the record office to keep the already prepared obituary in readiness—just in case. This was true of all papers, and every man who was of any importance in this world would find his obituary in the record office of every Fleet Street newspaper. What a nightmare it must be for the living to read what the world will say of them, when dust to dust returns. Mr. Baldon explained to John that there was no scope for sentiment or respect for feeling in modern journalism. As John left, Mr. Baldon shrugged his shoulders.

Outside in the street John could hear the great machinery of the press echoing in monotonous repetition the words: Human interest—human interest—h-u-m-a-n—h-u-m-a-n—h-u-m-a-n — and inside his heart, the throbbing syncopated to that same monotonous rhythm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THAT afternoon in his rooms in Tavistock Square, the bitter realization of his foolish haste made John disillusioned about all the great things he had hoped to achieve. Perhaps his father was right. It was uncanny but the older generation had an intuitive feeling which was seldom wrong. The experience of age was like a kind of native wisdom, which never had to be taught, but just came with the passing of years. Youth could never acquire it. Something radical would have to happen—a great revolution or a mighty earthquake before the old order would give place to new and the world was not ready for such a revolution.

The financial situation was now beginning to become more important everyday. So far John had paid Mrs. Thurlow's accounts punctually. He would still do so for a while, for he had ten pounds left and his gold cigarette case which he valued in terms of pawn. But when this was over what would he do? Would he have to face the humi-

liation of defeat and the apologetic return of the prodigal? Or would it be the streets or what? John had heard of poverty—a vague abstract something this world was always complaining about. Poverty was a relative term. When monarchs lost their thrones and relinquished the dazzling splendour of their palaces for the comfort of a country mansion, they complained of poverty. When millionaires came to the hundred thousand mark they were said to be living in poverty—but right down the scale, past the men who earned a pound a week, past the men who earned a few shillings a week, past the men who earned nothing, were those lost souls who did not possess so much as a roof to sleep under or a bed to lie on. Their lives were spent digging in the dust-bins and in the dirt, in the hope that out of it something might come. There were people as poor as that. That was humanity in the raw—what did they do?

As he sat on the padded chair, with the rejected manuscripts in his hands, these gruesome thoughts began to numb his senses. Gradually he passed into oblivion—sleep had saved him temporarily from the agony of consciousness, and when Mr. Pimlico looked in that afternoon to inquire how John had fared at the newspaper office, he saw John lying prostrate on his chair with manuscripts strewn around him, tired, beaten, utterly defeated. It would have been painful to awaken

him. The answer to Mr. Pimlico's question was written all over John. The rejected manuscripts were the living testimonials. So Mr. Pimlico left a little note for John and quietly went away.

Soon afterwards John got up. He had been, even in his sleep, conscious of the presence of someone in the room, though he was far too tired to mind. Facing him on the table was Mr. Pimlico's note. John opened it. It read: "I shouldn't worry. Pop in at the Troubador and we'll shoo the blues away!"

John did not think this theory was very sound, but he appreciated the thought, the kindness that had prompted it. He admired Mr. Pimlico for his diagnosis even though he had little faith in the cure. It was nearing tea-time and John was feeling famished. He ordered tea for two and shouted for Mr. Pimlico who came down and joined him.

"Thanks for the note. I am afraid my luck was out," John said, as Mr. Pimlico stepped into the room.

"Never say that. Perhaps it is all for the best."

"It doesn't quite feel like that."

"Well, it is none of my business but get out of this dump and you will feel a different man. Remember, if the worst happens you have always a home to go to."

"I don't want to face that situation."

"I know. But hanging round this gloomy

place will do you no good. If you are writing you must have atmosphere."

"That's true."

"Will you come tonight? Bring a girl with you. You must have tons of friends."

"I don't want to get mixed up with my old friends. Not till I am on my feet again."

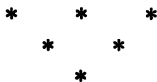
"All right. Come by yourself. I'll fix you up. Blonde or brunette, you can have your choice. Come on, be a sport."

"Very well. I'll come. But I will have to slip out for a dress shirt if I am coming."

"There's heaps of time. It's just four and the shops don't close till five-thirty."

"I'll shoot round after tea."

Up the steps came Mrs. Livingstone-Thurlow—groaning, creaking, panting. She announced that she had brought with her the 'coop-o-tea' and lovely 'tom-meto' sandwiches. It was one of those days when she was feeling 'reefayned.' She had probably had her bi-monthly sponge.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

AFTER tea John went to his shirt-makers in Bond Street. His credit was still good at the places at which he was accustomed to shop. The firm were probably aware of the estrangement in the family but were too tactful to refer to it. Besides a Sommerville, even though he is on the streets, is as safe as the Bank of England. They had always paid their debts. So when John walked in to buy a shirt, the head of the firm who always attended on him, dropped a gentle hint that John could buy anything he required and he should not worry in the least about the account. The old man then began to reminiscence, going as far back as the eighteen somethings when he was only an assistant and used to attend on John's grandfather. He traced the family history of Sommervilles with accuracy. It was his silent assurance that whatever happened a Sommerville was always welcome in his shop. All this was pleasant and soothing but quite unnecessary, John thought. However, he got what he wanted and stepped out

as soon as he could. The other shops in the district were closing and he paced up and down to see what London was wearing. He liked seeing beautiful things even if he could not afford them.

Nearing six, he began to trace his steps back home. At the corner of Bond Street and Vigo Street, he dashed into a young woman who was apparently running to catch a bus. John apologized. So did she. Then he remembered. So did she.

"Hello," she ventured.

"And was my suggestion any good?"

"We sold it the same day and I got a bonus of ten shillings. I wondered if I would meet you again."

"You have and I am so glad," John said, but to himself he was saying as he had said before when she was adjusting the evening gown in the window of her shop: "Cute little thing—very cute."

"Where are you going, carrying bundles? I didn't think smart men like you carried their own parcels."

"Perhaps I am not so smart."

"Oh, well.....".

"Doing anything tonight?"

"Tonight? Why?"

"I thought I might ask you to dinner. We could dance."

She looked at him, uncertain whether she should accept.

"Have I said anything wrong?" John played for safety.

"Silly, of course you haven't. I'd love to come. Do you want me to change for dinner?"

"Yes, that would be nice."

"When shall I call for you? Where?"

"I'll meet you. Piccadilly tube at eight-thirty."

"Sure?"

"Why, of course."

"Good. Bye-bye 8-30. Don't forget."

"I shan't forget."

The art of picking up is acquired after many years of experience. It is the hall-mark of the roué. In orthodox England, it is still considered immoral. Conventional morality is the code of morals imposed by that class of hopeless women who would if they could, but cannot and consequently dub those who can as immoral. It is so the world over.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THEY went that night to the Troubador. The two of them. Mr. Pimlico was delighted to see John with a girl, obviously not of his own class, and wondered how John had done it. In his heart Mr. Pimlico envied the rich, but he overcame that feeling within him, because he knew that what he felt towards the rich did not apply to John and he dismissed all base thoughts that crossed his mind. In fact he went out of his way to convince the manager how great an honour it was to have a Sommerville in the Troubador. This meant nothing to the manager, but one little word whispered in his ear by Mr. Pimlico as to the bank balance of John's father, woke him so suddenly that he was all over John for the rest of the evening. In fact he almost insisted that the dinner was on the management.

The *nouveau riche* who frequented the Troubador were a sordid crowd. It was only natural that they should be so. The perpetual realization that they were what they were

only on account of their sudden burst of wealth always made them take all they could from life, dreading a return to poverty. They were not wrong. Here before their very eyes was the example they had been looking for. Even though John was more or less down and out, the very thought that he was the lawful heir to the Sommerville millions, had made the manager dance attendance on him. What was this, they said to themselves, but a clear case of class consciousness? All this was true—very true and they felt it deeply.

But Phyllis was unaware of all the discomfort around her. She did not know who John was, nor that he was a Sommerville. Even if she did, it would mean little to her, living as she did in a little world of her own from her house to the dress-shop and back again, with an occasional visit to the pictures. The food she ordered was simple. She was definite about what she wanted—a Spanish omelette, an underdone steak and coffee. When John asked her if she would like to begin with oysters or caviar, she said: "No, what's the use of ordering things I have not learnt to appreciate."

The wine too she left to John, but declined to drink champagne. She preferred a white wine, preferably on the sweet side. Cheap, raw, unmaturing. It brought colour into her cheeks and made her talk a little.

So they sat and ate and drank. Sometimes they looked at the people around them and compared their observations. Sometimes they looked into themselves and confessed their feelings. In the far corner of the room they saw Mr. Pimlico doing brisk business. He had had a break after many days, for one of his old women had come back from a cruise in the Mediterranean. She had been entertaining young people so long, she felt that in fairness to herself she would let a young man entertain her for a change. She meant business and Mr. Pimlico was glad of it. He too had been resting too long a while. Bottles of champagne popped every half hour and the sky was the limit. That old woman had such spasms now and again as every neglected woman with money must have.

Phyllis and John had youth on their side. The mere feel of the body while dancing, the warmth of their cheeks was enough to draw them closer to each other. He did not have to hug his girl as sailors do. He was on a different plane and he reacted to the suppleness of her body without much physical provocation. She too knew that between them was a common denominator, too refined to be called passion, too new to be called love. It was something more modern than both. She called it understanding.

As they moved to the slow rhythm of the blues, he took her closer to himself, dug his lips into her soft black hair and kissed it. No one else saw.

No one could have seen in that subdued light, concealed in the four walls of the Troubadour. Her only answer was a gentle sigh. He felt it—first the holding up of breath, then the outlet of her emotion. Abruptly she pulled herself together and said: "Very pretty number, isn't it?"

"Is it?" John vaguely answered.

And she laughed.

"If you don't stop laughing," John said, mock-seriously, "I'll kiss you on your lips right in the middle of the floor. It'll probably cause sensation."

"You don't have to do it, John. It's already happened—I've felt that sensation—inside of me." And she sighed. And again he drew her nearer to himself and pressed her little breasts against his body, and when she closed her eyes he kissed her hair again—dark, black hair, soft as silk. That was how these two had met, by accident, by chance, caught in the mesh of fate. It was as if the gods had thrown these two mortals together and they were conscious of the mysterious working of fate. Unafraid, they had defied the laws of conventionality. Unafraid, they had not shirked to grasp their opportunities. Unafraid they were not ashamed to confess their love.

The night was calm and there was a sad stillness in the air. It was London at its best, untouched by the material forces of which it was the recognized metropolis. Now the shops were closed.

Now the little people with black coats and black dresses, who worked in them, had tucked into their beds far, far away. Now the streets were deserted but for a few stray cabs carrying stragglers of the night to unknown destinations. In such a London, Phyllis and John began to walk.

And they walked gently towards John's rooms. What a difference, John thought, there was between these two badly furnished, antiquated rooms and the historic seat of the Sommervilles with its choice architecture and its adornment. Yet, somehow, even in its apparent simplicity, interspersed with traces of such age and dirt of which cheap lodgings are full, there was an atmosphere of reality and of strength suggested by its crudeness and of home—not John's home—because it had been well lived in. The lodging looked the leasehold of a wage-earner rather than the heritage of a leisured class. Yet he made no apology for these surroundings. He was conscious of the poverty of them, because of their constant comparison with the surroundings he had been used to. He was quite sure she would understand. It did not seem to worry her at all. She merely laughed at its untidiness. Earlier in the evening he had in a moment of despondency said: "What is the use of asking for romance when there is no moon?" and she had laughed at his pathetic tone and replied: "Must you always have the moon?"

That summed up her theory of life. In a nutshell, she had expressed herself. It showed her at her best—content to take whatever was essential and vital in life, leaving the adornment to appear and disappear as circumstances allowed.

They did not talk very much. John was clutching a small glass of wine, while she had stretched a hand to pick up a current number of the 'Bystander', which John had bought to keep in touch with the goings-on in society, marking in red a paragraph here and a few lines there which referred to one or other of their circle. Phyllis raised a sympathetic eyebrow as she encountered these. She paused and remarked at the gorgeous splendour of the Beauty Page. How familiar to John were these faces; how much the photographer had advanced in his art to misinterpret them. That empty look was never in the picture, that purposeless and hollow dilettantism had not quite come through the lens; that sophistication that hovered round boredom had been retouched in the dark room and made to look like culture and experience; the breeding was always there. Wealth stood out more forcibly than anything else. From all this he had turned away and was determined never to retrace his footsteps again.

John had drifted so far from romance and sentiment that he had by now lost the technique of the approach. He thought of his past conquests, and how he would dim the lights as his

right arm encircled the soft silken waist; how the music would of its own accord soften, and how the radiogram would play whatever was appropriate at that moment. There never was any suspicion that John had arranged the order of the records. Then that subtle finesse with which he would bury his face in her lap—that deep breathing to indicate great passion—the first gentle caress to show restraint—and when it was over that feeling he would invariably experience of having given artificial respiration to a body long since dead. And he got up and not too audibly exclaimed to himself: “Bah!” as he thought of the frigidity of these icebergs, whose utter helplessness was quite out of keeping with their morals and to whom every new man was a new martyrdom.

He saw Phyllis standing before the mirror, combing out a few knots in an otherwise straight lock of hair and ruffling the silken texture so that it would no longer have that pasted effect. She knew he would like it so. Her little toilet completed, she sat next to him on the chesterfield, a look of triumph on her face, a grin—not a sneer—opening a heart that was throbbing with a genuine emotion—with a coyness which the mere dropping of the eyelids suggested. Her cheeks flushed in the first blush of her growing desire. Perhaps the raw wine had accentuated it. Different in upbringing and education, these two had come as from the far corners of the earth, yet susceptible to

the same impulses that are natural to man . . . they kissed as so many had done before . . . they did not wait for the moon.

John felt for the first time the shame of nakedness. It was the nakedness of the soul that had been stripped of all its superfluities and the artificiality that had encrusted his previous affairs. He gloried in that shame. Lips pressed against lips. Body against body. Soul against soul. Her eyes had closed. Her little shoulders seemed to fret in restlessness, as if she was trying to shake herself away from something she enjoyed so much. It was not a struggle but a fretting, for she clung on to the man. She kissed with less and less reserve, curling up her body in a snake-like formation, hanging on to the pent-up emotion that was ready to burst forth like molten lava . . . and two people in the world . . . this man and this woman . . . they did not wait for the moon . . .

She mopped his brow. She took his face in her hands and kissed it. She pressed it close to her naked breast. In her heart she felt a strange longing—for it was only her body that had been satisfied. Now she was beginning to feel the ache of the soul. The first sparks of love were kindling in her. She felt the normal symptoms—the possessive instinct, the protective instinct and the maternal instinct. Then she knew it must be love. It was not the first time she had let a man make love to her, yet she had contrived to retain

a freshness that one is accustomed to associate with a first affair. But in all her previous affairs she had never experienced that unsatisfied desire, that wanting for more, which she did now—for she wanted more than sex, she wanted love.

This spark of emotion, this intense human feeling may seem somewhat misplaced in a cynical generation in this age of tottering ideals. Orthodoxy never could understand the casual affair. It had no words to describe such a relationship except those which were usually associated with immorality. It had come to regard this sexual affair as something so sacred that it began to regard repression as a virtue and the realization of one's natural desires as a vice and a sin. What fools some men have been !

Phyllis remained with John till the early hours of the morning. She told him all her troubles and her sorrows, for he was the man closest to her then. John felt pleased at being taken into confidence. Then all of a sudden came a crash. It was when she snuggled up to him and told him how desperately she needed a little money. An old story—sordid, mean, savouring of houses of ill-fame. With each sentence she spoke, John saw his madonna falling. He had placed her on so high a pedestal, contrasted her so sharply with all the other women in his life that the fall from grace shocked his finer senses. The peace he had found in this woman's company was not worth the

disillusion—the sad realization that she was like all other women and had her price.

“That’s why I am asking you, John, because I love you. I couldn’t ask anyone else. You know I couldn’t.”

He did not reply. All the glamour of the evening had gone. Gone too was the little romance he had built round her. Gone were his lofty ideals—his hopes of finding the woman with a soul. As far as John was concerned, no such woman had as yet existed.

“John”, she whispered in his ear, “John, won’t you believe me? Won’t a man ever be convinced that a woman may sometimes speak the truth?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” he said and got up casually from the bed, slipped on his clothes. Without a word, he got three new, pound notes from his wallet and left them on the table near the bed. He did not say a word. To him they were the wages of sin—though they struck a heavy blow to his dwindling purse.

“If you know what that means to me, you would not give it the way you do. I gave up my body to you because I wanted to. I ask you for this money because I need it and I am not ashamed to ask for it because I love you.”

And John nodded in silence. There was a cynical smile on his face, for he did not believe her. The odds are always against the woman. She knew it too and started dressing.

“ I’ll bring it back to you, John, from my next week’s wages.”

“ There’s no need. Keep it. I owe it to you.”

“ That is a cruel thing to say to any woman, John. Cruel—very cruel.”

“ Sorry. Let us not talk any more about it. Shall I drop you anywhere ? ”

“ No ” she replied, “ I’ll find my way home. Thanks, John, someday perhaps you’ll be more tolerant. Someday perhaps, who knows ? ”

She kissed him on the forehead and left the room. In a few moments she was in the street. The grey dawn had not appeared and the morning was still far away.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THEY say that where there were dead men, there were grave-diggers, where there was money, there were gold-diggers. This intensely feminine organization had branches all over the world. Their methods of working were the same, and they made no distinction of race or caste or creed. Man was the common enemy and they were out to clean him out of whatever he had, whoever he was, without fear, without compassion, without even an apology. It was a sort of obsession with these women that men knew their wants and usually got what they wanted. It was this wholesale crucifixion of womanhood and virginity that they were out to avenge and the innocents they massacred in seeking their vengeance fell here and there and everywhere. John was one of the victims.

Yet man deserved what he got. He had lived too long in the false assumption of his rights. He had no respect for the women he enjoyed and laughed behind their backs. He said as a one-

time King of England had said that every woman had her price and it amused him to bargain and barter, sowing his wild-oats at the minimum of cost and the maximum of enjoyment. Men were pigs and John knew the herd to which he belonged. For all that he may have thought of little Phyllis, he was fully aware of the failings of his own sex, its reluctance to give in return for what they took, its greed for passion, its selfishness which was man's heritage.

In the morning John felt better, though a poorer man. He had now come well near the verge of bankruptcy. The gold cigarette case had melted out of sight, the pound notes one by one had disappeared and there was Mrs. Thurlow's little account staring him in the face. Whatever happened that could never be postponed. So he paid with his last pound and in his leather wallet there was nothing left but the lining.

When he paid his account he broached the subject to Mrs. Thurlow. Her face made several contortions, varying with each point that John made. Then came her final reply couched in firm tones, ladled with spoonfuls of patronizing condescension and charitable motives.

"I says to 'Arry, I says, no lodgers on credit. They do no good and in the end who pays? It's I who pays, and I don't work for nothing, Mr. Sommerville."

"Of course not, Mrs. Thurlow, I'd hate to put

you to any inconvenience. That's why I'm paying you the bill in full as we had agreed. I merely ask you about the next few weeks."

"Well, I donno—I hates to put you out and I hates to lose my money, and you are not the first I have obliged."

"Well, Mrs. Thurlow, it's up to you. Think it over and let me know in the afternoon. If you want me to leave, I'll go. If you can trust me, I'll stay."

Mrs. Thurlow looked him over *cap-à-pie*. It was what she called summing up people, and in spite of the mistakes she made, she trusted her own judgment. She did not say much, but mumbled another "I donno" to herself, and left the room with her account fully settled. Looking at the expression on her face one would have thought John had asked her to aid and abet in a low-down criminal conspiracy and she was having a struggle with her conscience deciding which way she should turn.

John stood there, contemptible and more or less penniless and the grim prospect of returning to his father clouded his vision. He lost all sense of fairplay and decency and he was out to stay in Tavistock Square, whether or not there was any prospect of making a living. He knew that in the end she would not go unpaid, but in the meanwhile he did not mind trading on her feeling. Mrs. Thurlow's belonged to that class in England

whose purposeless existence was one of the great points in favour of the sterilization of the mentally defective. Their defect was that they had absolutely refused to budge and their banal existence was a mere transformation from the fetus to flesh, from flesh to decay. They left nothing behind and the world was none the poorer for their loss. They were all the same—all old dirty women, who counted their shillings and pence and stooped to the most unscrupulous devices to make their lodgers pay. God alone knows why they were ever born.

Such were John's feelings at the time. Perhaps they were biased, for the instinct of self-preservation is natural in man and in his efforts to exist he will go a long way. He had convinced Mrs. Thurlow sufficiently to be allowed to remain in Tavistock Square for another week and the trouble started all over again. John's condition was getting more and more desperate, and the doors of editors' offices were slammed in his face. From everywhere the answer was the same. The story must have human interest and John was not prepared to sell his soul for a mess of pottage.

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During these trying days Mr. Pimlico was a constant source of comfort and encouragement. He gave John every help he could, except the one

he really wanted, for Mr. Pimlico had little money to throw about and what he made out of the Troubador just managed to keep a roof over his head. Several afternoons Mr. Pimlico would spend with John, discussing possible jobs and ways and means of raising cash. Invariably they would be forced to admit that there was only one thing for John to do and that was to return home and acquiesce in his father's wishes. There seemed no way out of the mess John had got into and every time he crossed Mrs. Thurlow's path, he was made to feel that he was living under the shelter of her roof on sufferance and charity and it was only because she was an honest-to-God Christian that she tolerated it. But even her Christianity had its limits and the laws of God have to be interpreted liberally, for charity does after all begin at home.

Mr. Pimlico was prepared to go a long way to do something for John. He even suggested very discreetly that the Troubador or some such establishment may need the services of an amiable young man who could act as a restaurant host. Of course, there were several duties which such a job carried with it, which were not mentioned by him but as the purpose of a gigolo is to please the client at any cost, John might have to pay too high a price for the freedom he was seeking. Was it worth it?

"I would still advise you to go back to your

home and your people" Mr. Pimlico said finally, "but if....."

"That's impossible. Quite impossible. So don't mention it again."

"Well, I'll do all I can. I'll speak to the manager about you. It's the best I can do. But it is a shame that a young man like you, with a home like Galford Park and parents like the Sommervilles should have to fall as low as I have. That's why I hate to feel I am making you stoop to my own level. Believe me, sometimes I feel ashamed of myself. I can't face the world. That's why I hide myself till I can do something that will free me from all this dirt. It's dirt, I tell you, dirt, and like blood it leaves stains behind."

"Don't worry about me. I have got another idea. There's one other man I know whom I can approach."

"A friend of yours?"

"Well, I don't know—yet. I met him in a train coming back from Oxford."

"No good, John, that won't get you very far. And what if he cannot?"

"Well, there are a hundred thousand people on the streets. Have been all their lives without a home, without parents, without anything to call their own—except their self-respect and their freedom. One more will not matter. The garbage heap will stink just as much."

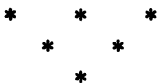
"I can't stop you. I can only give you my opinion for what it is worth."

"All right. Let's leave it at that. I'll say good-bye to you now—in case I don't see you for a while." ‘

"Good-bye and good-luck."

"Thank you for all you have done. I shall not forget it."

When Mr. Pimlico left John's room he wondered if they would ever see each other again.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THAT evening John walked to Grosvenor Mews in search of the bearded St. John Caska. John had not enough to pay for a conveyance and even the cigarettes he smoked were no longer from his gold cigarette case. They were cheap gaspers, discreetly left behind by Mr. Pimlico.

The evening was damp and chilly for it had been raining and the piercing east-wind was blowing hard. With his collar turned up and his hands in his trouser pockets, his clothes soaking in the wet he walked down the paved streets and the wide squares on his way to Caska's house. In a little alley off the square, he found a street board which indicated "Grosvenor Mews, W. 1" and he turned into this dark blind alley which was the last street of hope before he took to the open road.

A few expensive-looking cars were lying in the open mews and liveried chauffeurs were hovering around them. They all seemed so much alike, as if they had been turned out to pattern. There were the James's and the Charles's—the expe-

rienced and the superior-looking, and the young and the haughty.

Between two garages was a little red door with a brass number plate. It was, John found from Caska's card, the entrance to the studio. He rang the bell and waited patiently in the cold. Nothing happened, and he was beginning to feel the dampness of his clothes against his warm flesh. He took out a cigarette from his pocket. It was the last and he thought twice before he lit it.

Everything seemed to have come to an end—even life itself was drawing to a close as he stood there in the pelting rain, waiting, waiting for someone to answer the door. He rang once again, for a dim light flickered in the attic and there was some sign of life. As he looked up, he saw the window open and the face of an old woman suddenly peered out, looking ghost-like in the dark, and with equal suddenness it withdrew. There was something sinister about the whole affair. It made the flesh creep. Still he waited. Then, down the wooden staircase, the heavy treading of feet could be heard. It came nearer with every step. The latch was turned and the door opened.

"Whom do you want?" she said.

"Is Mr. Caska in?" John shouted.

"Mr. Caska—he be gone."

"Gone—gone where?"

"I dunno."

"But does he live here?"

"This is his house."

"Good—now tell me, has he gone out for the day or for a few weeks or has he left for good?"

"Who are you?"

"I am Mr. Sommerville."

"Oh! Mr. Sommerville. Oh! yes."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"I remember he says something may be you'd be calling, to give a message to you."

"Where is it?"

"It is in me head, but I can't find it at the moment."

"I wish you would wake up."

"Wake up? Where do you think I am going this time of the night?"

"Nowhere, I just want you to try and remember what message Mr. Caska left for me."

"Oh yes, yes, yes," and she was still as vague as ever.

"When do you expect him back?"

"Never can tell."

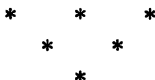
"Have you got a forwarding address? Where do you send his letters? I must know. You see it's very important. A question of life and death."

"No address. All letters remain here till he comes back."

"And you don't know when that will be?"

And she shook her head. There was nothing more to be said or done. He had come so near

St. John Caska but the stupidity of an old forgetful woman had come in his way. It was the sort of luck you could not fight against. In the wet streets he started to tramp again, tramping, tramping in the cold. He was in no hurry to get anywhere for he was not making for Tavistock Square. He was walking in the direction of the Embankment.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE gloom over Galford Park had not lifted. The silence in which they lived heightened the tension and the Sommerville family had made a gallant effort to reconcile themselves to the thought that John would no longer be with them.

Anne felt the loss most, though it was Mrs. Sommerville who occasionally showed any emotion, for she would come into the dining-room and look in the direction of the seat which was no longer laid. Then her eyes would look down, clouded as they were with a wet darkness, and as she looked down into her plate a tear or two would roll down her cheeks. Then she would pull herself together and wipe her eyes. A few moments later she would without turning to Ronald say: "Sorry, Ronald, I couldn't control it."

The old man would take her hand in his from under the table, give it an affectionate squeeze and reply: "Everything will be all right, dear. He can't last out much longer. This obstinate generation has to be taught a lesson—once and for

all. I hate to do it, Claire, for he is my own son, but to spare the rod is to spoil the child."

And Mrs. Sommerville without a murmur would begin to eat, each morsel of food sticking like a lump in her throat. Yet she swallowed what was before her. Ronald, however, seemed quite unruffled. In his own mind, he was quite sure that John would return very soon. Ronald had worked out how long John's money would last and made allowances for John's power of borrowing and earning a few pounds from odd jobs. But in the end there would be only two alternatives left for John, Galford Park or the streets and there was little doubt in Mr. Sommerville's mind which of the two his son would choose.

Meanwhile his own mind had been preoccupied with greater things. No one knew what kept calling him to London so frequently. He had been seen going in and out of the Foreign Office and occasionally he was found closeted for several hours with the Secretary of State for War. But no one knew the why and the wherefore of Mr. Sommerville's mysterious movements. Only when he reclined on the leather chair beside his writing-table, Anne had noticed that her father had often played with the shots and shells which were the new paper-weights on his table. It was like a schoolboy playing with toy-soldiers, though the toys seemed somewhat grown up and were of full size.

Of late he had become more affectionate towards his daughter. He did little things for her of his own accord, which he had never done before. He would go to the best florist in town and order a bunch of the most expensive flowers and have these sent to his daughter with his card.

There was also this difference which the shopkeepers of the West-End noticed. Mr. Sommerville now appeared in person to select the flowers, and the dresses and the presents for his daughter. In fact had they not known that Miss Anne Sommerville was his daughter, they might have drawn a different conclusion.

Anne, however, still remained untouched by all her father's lavish affection. She showed her appreciation politely, and sometimes even with exuberance, but there was a bridge between them which no amount of presents could ever gulf, and they were both conscious of it.

As for Mrs. Sommerville she was torn between her maternal love and duty to her husband and she did not know which way to turn. Somehow she managed to keep the two feelings apart. It was as if the head and the heart were going in different directions and she managed to avoid the clash between reason and emotion. But it was a strain on her little nerves though she was a gallant woman.

Late one evening by the last post a letter arrived. It was addressed to Mrs. Sommerville and the

hand in which the address was written was not familiar to her. It was a man's hand, but full of flourishes, giving a slight insight into his character.

Anne and her mother were at home by themselves when this letter arrived. They had dined alone that night for Mr. Sommerville had been delayed by an important engagement in town and had telephoned to say he would not be back till late that night. He had called from one of the offices in Whitehall, though where he was or why he was delayed no one knew.

Mrs. Sommerville opened the letter and read it. Her face paled as she scanned it line by line. The news was about John, and Anne ventured to take the letter from her mother's hand. It read :
Dear Mrs. Sommerville,

I hope you will forgive my writing to you like this. Your son, John, stayed here in the same house in Tavistock Square. He was in great distress recently, particularly on account of cash, and I tried to persuade him to go back to you and I was sure everything would be all right. He would not listen to me and in the end got very broke. He went to some friend for help as he owed Mrs. Thurlow, (that is the landlady's name) some money for her account. He told me then that he would not return to the house unless he got the help he wanted. I thought everything would turn out O.K. but he has not turned up for the last four days and I am very worried. I

know he is all right, but he must be roughing it out.

His clothes and things are all here and his papers too. Mrs. Thurlow is becoming very nasty about it, so I thought it best to let you know. She does not know, nor does John, that I have written this to you. Please forgive me if I have done anything wrong.

Yours sincerely,
A Friend.

"I want you to go to town tomorrow, Anne," Mrs. Sommerville said with her heart in her throat.

"Yes, mother, I'll do everything. I promise."

"Take some money with you. I'll give it to you. See if you can find John."

"What if I do?"

"Tell him I'll send him all he wants."

"Do you want me to ask him to come back?"

"No, Anne. That's for him to decide. But I don't want him to be at the mercy of others—not while I am alive."

And she closed her eyes and tears rolled down her cheeks. She bit her lower lip. It was painful to see this mother cry. She took a little gasp of breath and to herself she exclaimed "My son, my son." It was not the only time Mrs. Sommerville had given vent to her feelings.

"I don't want you to mention anything about

it to father,," she said, "he must never know."

And she broke down again, as any woman would who has had her child torn away from her breast.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

NEXT morning a cab was seen creeping along the houses in Tavistock Square. It jostled along till it stopped outside the frontage of John's lodging house. Anne stepped out of this cab. She was quietly dressed and there was a sad expression on her face as if she had aged overnight.

Mrs. Livingstone-Thurlow answered the door and on seeing so "distinguished a lady", she changed her expression and Anne took courage in both hands and asked : "Did a gentleman by the name of Mr. Sommerville stay here ?".

"Gentleman—huh ? He ain't no gentleman who runs away without paying my bills."

"Let's not discuss that now, Mrs.....eh ? I have been asked by him to come and collect his things and.....".

"No, you don't," she emphatically said, "not till he has paid what he owes to me."

"That is exactly what I have come for. If you will give me the account I'll settle it in full

for you."

"Well....eh....I donno what it is. Can't tell you off hand like. But may be I could reckon it up. Come in, lady."

"Thanks—but will you please be quick. If you will show me to his rooms I'll pack up while you get the account ready."

"'Arry. 'A-r-r-y. That's me husband. He's never in. But if you will go to the first floor you will find everything there. Just the door in front of you."

"Thank you", and Anne shot up the stairs.

One look at the rooms, dirty, unclean rooms, with manuscripts littered on the floor told Anné the whole story. Quietly she brought out the cases which had been tucked under the bed and began packing them hurriedly.

Mrs. Thurlow was soon up. She had scribbled a few items on a stray piece of paper, which was headed "Dr.....Mrs. Livingstone-Thurlow."

"There", she said, "that makes three pounds and eleven shillings and, oh! I forgot, there's the laundry. Let me see, six shillings was it? And I must make a small charge for keeping his things here. Ten shillings—I'll be fair. And there's two baths at a shilling a piece and..", she looked all round the room, "there's a mess to clear up—but I'll be fair. I always am. I says to 'Arry, that's my husband, always be fair and

God helps you to be sure. Five shillings is all I'll charge for cleaning up the mess."

"How much does that make in all Mrs. Thurlow?"

"Let me see", and she sat down and totalled it all up three times. In the end when it came to four pounds and fourteen shillings, she insisted there was some mistake or was it that she had left something out. She tried hard to find a few odd items she could push into the account. But Anne remained unmoved and Mrs. Thurlow's repeated protestations that somehow the account did not seem quite right made no impression on her.

"Now Mrs. eh. Thurlow, here is the money. Will you kindly give me a receipt for it?"

"Well, I says. I never give receipts nor take receipts, I always believe in trust and God help you."

"I am afraid I must insist on a receipt. You have charged for certain items and if you take the money for them, you must put it down on paper. In case the matter should go to court it is evidence against you."

"Court?" Mrs. Thurlow exclaimed.

"Well, you never can tell, can you?"

"Well, lady, I don't want to dispute anything so to speak. You just give me what you think fair and if you feels I've charged too much, I shall knock it off. Be fair, I always says to 'Arry,

my husband."

"That's all right, Mrs. Thurlow. I am paying your bill in full. But next time when you speak of my brother be careful what you say."

"Your brother, I knew it all the time. I says to 'Arry....."

"Never mind what you say. If you are prepared to put in items in the bill which you know don't belong there, you must not think that those who pay you are fools. They do so out of charity. You could be dragged into court for charging to clean up the room. Ever heard of such a thing?"

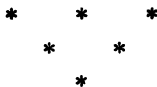
"Well, Miss. I donno the laws of England. I only says, be fair and I thought may be I'd take a little for the trouble."

"All right, Mrs. Thurlow. That's all right. Will you help me to get these in the cab and we will say nothing more about it."

"Certainly, lady, and if you"

"Come on, Mrs. Thurlow."

Between the two of them and the cabman they managed to put the suit cases in the cab. As the cab drove away from Tavistock Square, Mrs. Thurlow breathed a deep sigh of relief. It had been for her the lesson of a lifetime.



CHAPTER THIRTY

MR. and Mrs. Arthur Marsden had only a few months ago walked up the aisle. Arthur had left Oxford and settled in London, where his father's influence had got him a job with a firm of shippers in the City. They had taken a little flat in Chelsea, as all moderns do, and had furnished it in the futuristic manner—in curves and straight lines. It was skeleton furniture and made the bare room look spacious.

Arthur's parents had taken to Daphne as a duck takes to water. They were very understanding people though their intelligence was mediocre, and they believed Arthur when he confessed to them that the only reason why he married Daphne was that the world meant nothing to him without the woman he loved.

Arthur's mother was particularly touched by this. She was the type of woman who read Rebecca West but felt more at home with Berta Ruck, and she looked upon *The Rosary* of Florence Barclay as the true expression of feminine

sentiment. One cannot blame a woman for her feelings. In fact one admired the frankness with which she confessed them.

Her son's marriage, therefore, brought back romance into her life. She would go in the mornings and shop for them. She would order and pay for little luxuries out of her own pocket. She wanted her son to have a home and his wife to keep it for him.

The original disappointment was forgotten and the thought of a home began to appeal to Arthur. He was now taking delight in the idea that within a few months he would be a father. In fact the old affection he had for Daphne was being revived again and he would come back from office and the rest of the evening he would often spend in her arms, lying there on the divan with his lips pressed close to her.

No one knew their little secret. No one knew that a little Marsden was on his way. No one had any suspicion that this marriage had been forced. Nor did Daphne and Arthur betray any signs. They were to the outside world a young romantic run-away couple, who could not wait any longer, and the world liked them for it.

On one such evening when they were in their Chelsea flat, living in the perfect bliss of contentment, a letter with an Indian stamp dropped through the slit of the door.

Daphne picked it up and rushed over to Arthur

saying : " Where do you think, this comes from ? "

" I don't know. "

" India—Bombay. "

" No—whom is it from ? "

" It's Pen's writing. "

" Well....well....I had almost forgotten her."

Daphne began to read it loudly. She laughed at the appropriate places and to her the old flat and the old freedom came back again.

The letter read :

From Bombay Harbour.

Darling,

It's too awful of me not to have written to you earlier, though I did drop a post-card from Gib. Since then Tony and I haven't had a moment to spare. Everything is simply gorgeous and we are always being asked to parties on board and there are ever so many parties being given on these pleasure cruises.

Life is just too too scrumptious for words, and I never knew I could love anyone so much, but Tony is a dear and buys me everything. He wants to marry me, but then life wouldn't be half so exciting on a world-tour, would it ? So we are putting it off till we get back and then will probably go on another cruise for our honeymoon.

You'll see from the address that we are in Bombay. We stay here for a week and today is the fifth day. Some have gone by train to various

places in India to see the temples and old forts, but we find Bombay just heavenly. Last night we went to the Taj Mahal. It is not the one we see in pictures--not that white marble in blue moonlight. This is a hotel, and what a hotel! There is a band and drinks are cheap out here. Tony says it is known all over the world, like the Savoy and the Ritz, but we never heard of it. Did we?

Daph darling, you must see the East some day. It's simply gorgeous. I began to feel native when I saw the dresses of the Arab boatmen at Suez. It was like so much colour splashed against the drab background of a long range of sand dunes. Then at Port Said we got out and bought some lovely amber cigarettes "and feel-thee" post-cards and Tony has been making violent love to me ever since. Really, I never thought he had it in him. The glamour of the East seems to have enraptured him.

In Bombay we were introduced to two Indian Princes, who are very rich. Maharajahs! They wanted us to go to their State and stay in the Palace as their guests. One of them was particularly nice to me and tried to tempt Tony with some big-game shooting. Of course I would have had to stay in the Palace, which would have been such fun, but Tony thought we'd better finish the cruise, now that we have started.

All the women out here wear lovely silk "sarīs"

draped round their waists and like shawls over their heads. They are quite modern and cut their hair and drink cocktails! I met one yesterday. She talked like Tallulah and had lovely eyes. She told me that the trouble in India was due to an "economic depression." Well, thank God, we haven't any such depression in England.

How is Arthur? And when is the little one arriving? I am just dying to see it.

Give my love to every one, darling, and keep tons and tons for yourself. We push off day after tomorrow to Singapore and then Shanghai. China is even more mysterious than India, and Tony tells me I'll simply go mad on Confucius and Buddha. They are Chinese.

So long darling. I'll write again.

Love from Pen.

So they finished their letter and they finished laughing. There was only one part of it that worried Daphne and Arthur. It was Pen's reference to the child. How did she know? Or was it just her manner of speaking, her long experience of the ways of the world? Pen had seemed so definite about it. It was the one thing that had spoilt their evening, but they were too tactful to refer to it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE days passed and John began to see more of life than ever before. He knew now what it really meant to be poor. At Oxford he had seen the hunger marchers. They had passed through his life waving little red flags and he had felt for them. He had heard of the tragedies of the poor. He had been told of disabled men, of armless men and women with half-eaten breasts and he knew how horrid that must be. But all these people he had seen only in the distance and they had passed him without making any permanent or lasting effect on his mind. Now in his poverty he had lived with them. He had seen human flesh in the raw. Their bodies, which were ghastly phantoms, lay huddled beside him. The odour of their unwashed bodies stank in his nostrils. It was as near as he could get to man in the abstract—untouched by all the sophistication of a civilized world, its science, its hygiene, its sanitation. The only justification for their existence was that they were the work of

God, and as such had to be respected, for life was still a thing that man had not learnt to produce.

In a hostel, where a bed cost only sixpence, John had found his new home. The men who stayed there were not ashamed of their poverty. They would go every morning and pick up a shilling or two to keep them there with a roof over their head, a bite of stale bread and if anything was left, it would buy them a few puffs of a cheap cigarette, which they would pass round the circle of silent friends. No one grumbled. No one referred to their poverty. No one asked embarrassing questions of the other—and when any one left them, they felt happy, for it meant work and employment and self-respect once again.

It was amazing how men in their poverty come near to each other. It was this something that distinguished men from animals. Four months ago a carpenter from the North had walked to London in search of work. He was a single man, without a family, without parents, without any dependants whatsoever. Luck had come his way and he had found work in a railway store. What he earned was by no means a large sum, but it was enough. The three weeks he had stayed in this hostel, he had known what it felt like to be hungry, to pick up cigarette stumps that had been trodden on in the damp and the dirt of the pavements. Every pay-day

he would go back to this graveyard of living men with a packet or two of cigarettes, a large loaf of new bread, and perhaps a piece of meat, and they would sit round the fire eating, laughing, as if nothing was wrong with the world. On one such Sunday morning they were in their little circle, warming their cold bodies in front of a fire that had risen out of a garbage heap. John passed through the open courtyard, a melancholy figure whom no one knew and no one understood. The young carpenter had seen him once before and he called out to him: "Say, buddy, come on over and join the party."

John stood rooted to the ground. He had not eaten for two full days and had wandered about London in a daze.

"Come on over and share the doings."

John realized what it meant—food and a cigarette—warmth and a fire. It meant some human being to talk to and he walked over to them and without a word sat down in the circle. No introductions were made. No formalities were exchanged. All were welcome.

"'Ere, take a bite," said the man next to him, pushing a meat sandwich into John's hands.

"That's all right," John managed to say, "you go first."

"There ain't no first here, buddy, it's all equal, see. Come on and eat." And John did not argue any more.

He had his cup of tea when his turn came, the same cup being circulated round and then each man got his gasper and leant back on the sooty wall and smoked it. As they sat back they discussed the great problems of the world—the political situation, foreign policy, the government of the day, the press, women, the economic question. Each had his own views. Each had the right to express them. From their pockets they would pull out the cast-off newspapers of the evening before, which they had picked up from an odd bench in the park or from the pavements of the city. This varied assortment of the London press they would read out to each other and comment on it.

Sunday morning was spent this way. It was a tramps' holiday. First Alf would read his paper and then Albert and 'Arry and George. John listened patiently to this self-organized newspaper-reading society. The hot tea had forced a broad smile on his face and the coarse bread and thick chunks of meat had stopped the rumbling inside his stomach. Albert was now reading the paper. His accent was a cross between broad Scotch and South Welsh and the cockney in him added a few touches to the more important words. "New Peer. Gor' bligh me. Declines the peerage. 'Ere, listen to this, fellahs. Government offer peerage to ammunition magnate, Mr. Ronald Sommerville begs to be hexcused."

John heard the name. It staggered him. He paled at the mention of his father's name. Here of all places in this lowest den of inequity. He never said a word, nor did he show any enthusiasm to hear what was being read.

Albert continued: "Beggars to be hexcused, does he? Ammunition magnate. Never 'eard of him."

"Sommerville, eh?" someone asked.

"The bloke gets a peerage for making guns and powder and we are the mugs that fights the war."

"That's orright, Alf. It's like that the world over. 'Tis the rich that gets the pleasure. 'Tis the poor that pays."

"Fancy," Alf interrupted, "a peerage for services rendered. A peerage! Gawd bligh me."

John listened painfully to the discussion on his own father. It symbolized the poor man's point of view which never found expression in any paper. It had no human interest. So the editors would have told you. These down and outs, each with a vote in the country which belonged to them, were speaking out their own minds. It hurt them to think that here they were on the borderline of life and death, without so much as a shilling between them and the man who robbed the Government of millions by supplying ammunition and cannon fodder, was offered a peerage. Perhaps they were too brutal in their criticism. They might in their language have even exceeded the bounds of decency. But

how could you expect men who were clinging on to life by a hair to do otherwise ?

Turn by turn each had their little bit of fun at the expense of the great magnate who was declining so great an honour as a peerage. Some suggested that it was modesty. Sarcasm and bitterness combined to attribute the basest motives for the refusal. John's quietness began to be marked, when Alf turned round and in perfect earnestness asked John : " What have you to say, buddy ? "

" Nothing," John answered, and all eyes turned towards him. His answer was so peculiar, so dignified.

" Nothing ? ". George asked, " what would you say if he was your father ? ".

John startled. His cheeks flushed with rage, for it was too much, but the carpenter from the North eased the situation, saying :

" 'E wouldn't be 'ere, would 'e, with a father like that ? " and they all laughed.

" I was only supposing like," George said. He realized that he was hurting a poor man's feelings by associating him with people who rolled in millions. The irony of it all was too painful. Only a young man like John could come out of it as he had done—for they laughed and liked him and there was not the slightest suspicion in their minds who he was, for George finally said : " May be we wish we had a father like that. May

be we don't. Ain't I right, lad ? " And John vaguely assented.

Long after that social circle broke up, John wandered in the yard, wondering about these men, who were bound to each other by no ties of blood, but who were closer than friends could be. Poverty had brought them together and they accepted their lot without resentment, without grumbling, with only bitterness in their heart. The grudge they had towards those who had wealth was never shown by them. Yet it was always in their heart. Someday it might break out in an open revolution, so bloody that the revolutions of France and Russia would look pink in comparison, but the great men of England have told us that this is not possible in the land where democracy was born, and where democracy has still been preserved. It is one of the amazing things about the oppressed in England—their powers of endurance are phenomenal and they love their country too much to take their vengeance on it. No—a revolution in England—that was not possible !

However, one idea came out of all this. It sounded even fantastic, but John had waited for it a long time. It was the idea for a play. He had seen so much of humanity in the raw that he felt sure he could depict it on any stage. What a sensation that would make. There before his eyes was the theme he had been looking for,

even the title had suggested itself. He wanted to portray that feeling of guilt which he felt as one of those who had done little to allay the sufferings of the poor and the opening scene would begin in the courtyard, just as it had done that morning. Their blood was still on his hands. That would be the title: "Blood is on my hands."

John could see it flashing over some theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue. He had always wanted his name to twinkle over the face of London, on and off, on and off. Great ideas were in his head, but in his pockets there was still only nothing. He wanted to go that night to a West End show, and get the atmosphere of the London stage. But he could not do this on thrupence, which was all he had on him. He fretted restlessly all that day. He could see the story come to him, scene by scene, act by act, curtain by curtain. He was even beginning to feel the blood trickling over him, the deep red stains he could not wash away. So he continued all day, putting down his thoughts as they came to him, jotting down the dialogue he had heard only in the morning. All day he worked, till a late hour in the evening, when he went out to earn another six pence, paid for his bed and lay heavily on it.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

EARLY next morning, John was out again, desperately trying to make a few shillings which would take him to a theatre that night. As he strolled down that Avenue, from which shot out Wardour Street and Greck Street, he saw new posters going up on the theatre at the corner. It was the first night of a new play and in his mind he saw the vision of the future. When he looked more carefully he saw the name was not his own. It was that of Geoffrey Durrant. Yes, he looked again, "Geoffrey Durrant"—"Sensational play by young Oxford undergraduate." *The Mad Symphony* by Geoffrey Durrant. Geoffrey Durrant Geoffrey Durrant! It was written all over the theatre. The opening night was the same evening and as John looked at himself in the long glass which covered the photo-frame, he saw he was in no condition to go. He felt ashamed of himself and his clothes. For once he hated those who had driven him to this desperation. He hated his father, he hated Durrant, he even hated

little Phyllis. for she had cleaned him out of his last few pounds.

The workmen were still busy erecting the posters. He wished he could help, but was afraid of being turned down. All he could do was to look wistfully at the name of the man, he once admired so much, being turned over and sideways—though to him it still read the same: "Geoffrey Durrant."

As he leant against one of the pillars of this theatre, his mind far, far away, a woman passed by. John vaguely noticed her. She turned round and passed him again, and yet he did not care. She did it a third time and it amused him. This little woman was interested in John or something very close to him. John saw her come up again. This time she came straight for him. Perhaps it was his imagination. She was one of those little things who wore hats that hid half the face, and she looked young and modern and full of life.

"What use is she to me?" John asked himself, his hands in his empty trouser-pockets. But she was persevering and came nearer to him. As he looked down he could feel her presence beside her. She had stopped walking and was now standing close, very close to him. Still he did not bother.

"John", the little woman's voice said, and John looked up, unbelieving. "John," she said again "I've looked all over for you. Where have you

been ? I went to your apartment again, but you had left. I wanted to give you the money you lent me. Don't you remember ? I am Phyllis—Phyllis—the girl in a window in Bond Street—the Troubador—that night. . . You didn't believe me?"

And then he knew who she was. He ran his fingers through his hair and his hand over his face and looked again. He could not believe his eyes. "That's all right," he said, somewhat indifferently, "I wasn't worrying about it at all."

She opened her bag and pulled out six clean ten shilling notes from an inner purse.

"That's all right. Keep it. I don't need it—really."

Phyllis looked hard at him. She did not want to embarrass him by looking too much at his dishevelled appearance.

"Please," she said kindly, "I'd rather you did."

"Are you sure you can spare it—because really—I don't. . .".

"John, please."

He took it from her. A feeling of relief came over him. His clothes were far from smart and the crease in his bags had almost disappeared.

"I am sorry, I am very untidy this morning," he said apologetically, "I've been working on a play for the last few days."

"A play ?"

"Yes, why not ?" he was so sure of what he

said, "in fact I am coming to see this show tonight" And then hurriedly he added: "...from the gods, because I want to get a true perspective of the whole thing. It was written by a friend of mine. At least he was....a friend."

"Oh! how lovely," she said, believing him.

"Would you like to come?" John asked.

"Love to."

"You don't mind seeing it from up above."

She shook her head. There was that lovely smile on her face which made one feel the world was still beautiful in spite of all the misery that John had seen. And to himself he said once again: "Cute kid, very cute."

"I'll meet you, here, tonight. We'll have a bite later on."

And she smiled once again—the same smile—the type of smile which said: "I surrender dear."

"Then at seven-forty-five at the entrance?"

"All right, John."

"You won't mind if I have no time to change, will you? I am so busy."

"I shan't mind."

"I'll have a shave though." John smilingly added.

And she laughed, took his hand, squeezed it and ran to the bus which would drop her at the corner of Bond Street.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

DURRANT's play was a great success. *The Mad Symphony* had a great reception and John cheered enthusiastically when he saw Geoffrey Durrant come on the stage and take the bow. Among the stalls he saw many familiar faces. There was Arthur Marsden and his wife, Daphne. There were a few of the first-rate critics on whose written word the success of a play depended. There were the Agates and St. John Irvines. There was beauty and intellect, sitting close to each other, row after row, seat after seat. There was Oxford—strewn all over the twelve-and-six-pennies, for Durrant was popular at his University and they had come in large numbers to give him a hand.

John remembered the night when he had gone with Anne and Geoffrey to see *Hamlet*. He remembered how Durrant had over a glass of champagne said. "To the three of us, then," and they had drunk to the day when the play would appear in the West End and these three would

see it from the box. How different it all was from the evening they had planned! Anne was not in the theatre, and John was in the heavens with people, who were dressed like him, shabbily, and who were tired after their day's work. There were Londoners from greater London—from Hounslow and the Elephant and Castle—the people of whom one seldom hears.

John noticed that one box was empty. As he entered the theatre he saw a crowd of people who would have paid anything for a box. Yet there it was, on the right side of the stage, cold and empty. For all we know it might have been kept for some royal personage, who may not have turned up. Still he wondered.

After the theatre, John suggested dinner, but Phyllis was sure he could not afford it. In the weeks that had passed since they last met, this man to whom she had given herself, this man of whom she had dreamt at night and by day, had changed beyond all recognition. She had seen the face smiling at her as she got up in the morning. She had imagined him lying beside her on those cold nights when she had hugged her pillow. But as she looked at him in the glaring lights of the foyer, he looked washed out and hungry and youth had disappeared from his face.

There were other reasons which confirmed her belief that he was poor. John was continually explaining away his shabby attire, his bearded,

unwashed face of the morning. He was finding excuses for everything he did—and that was hardly like the man she knew.

“I don’t feel like dinner,” she repeated.

“Oh! but I do. I haven’t had a decent meal for a couple of days..eh..I mean I simply haven’t had the time.”

“Come on, John, let’s eat then. I’ll just have a bite and watch you eating. Come on.”

So they went to a little gourmet spot, where the cuisine was continental and the service bad. But they ate good food and were glad of it. Some people around wondered who these two could be—this smartly turned out, chic little woman and this shabbily dressed, refined but dirty-looking man. But there were so many Bohemians floating round Soho that they did not think any more about it.

When they finished they strolled down the back streets of Soho, along Shaftesbury Avenue, down Regent Street, looking at the shops. Arm-in-arm they walked as lovers do on a clear night. So they did, though the night was dark and foggy and the cold was turning their nose-tips red.

“Aren’t you cold, John ? ”.

“Not much.”

“Let’s go home—back to your place.”

“No, Phyllis, not today.”

“Are you still ashamed of being with me ?
Do you hate me still ? ”

“Hate you, what for ? Don’t be silly.”

"Then, what is it?"

"Nothing, my dear. They don't like me bringing friends late at night."

"Oh!"

"They are rather stupid that way. In fact I am going to change shortly. I am not satisfied with the place."

"Then shall I see you again?"

"Of course, you will," and for the first time he leant over as if he was whispering something in her ear and kissed her.

"When?" Phyllis asked.

"Thursday?"

"Not before?", she said, disappointedly.

"Well, Phyllis, I shall hardly have time to go out before that. I must really do something about this play."

"I like to see it too. Will you bring it along?"

"If you promise to look sweet, I will."

"I promise."

They laughed. At the bus stop they waited—the two of them. When the bus arrived, she jumped on.

"Thursday then," he shouted, "at Piccadilly where we first met."

"All right. Good-night, darling."

And from the passing bus she merely waved.

Late that night John tucked himself in the rough blanket of his six-penny bed. He was sure there were vermin crawling over his body.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

GALFORD Park was the scene of much activity. Journalists hung around outside the gates, waiting to see who went in and out. Cabinet ministers had dined there more than once that week and one of His Majesty's Secretaries of State had spent a week-end there.

Great precaution was taken to preserve secrecy and Scotland Yard men were posted all round the house to see that Galford Park was not disturbed. The news that the quiet country squire had blossomed into an industrial magnate, dabbling in armaments, had been received with mixed feelings. The local Labour organization had made several demonstrations in the market square and in one of the local papers, there was an open letter to Mr. Sommerville, which made such precautions necessary.

There was one redeeming feature in Mr. Sommerville's recent activities. His request to be allowed to decline the peerage, stamped him as a simple man who had the safety of his country at heart

and not the greed for wealth, power and glory. Modesty was the general explanation for Mr. Sommerville's attitude. His request to be allowed to decline the high honour was granted and he came out of it better than he would otherwise have done. But it became an open secret that Mr. Sommerville was one of the important people behind the Cabinet and that he was frequently being consulted on important questions of foreign and defence policy. In fact some went so far as to say that the recent visits of Cabinet members could have only one explanation viz. they were trying to induce him to take office even if he would not accept the peerage—and that the peerage had only been offered to him to make it easier for him to join the Government without having to face the ordeal of facing an electorate. But all these were mere guesses and no one really knew what was going on in Galford Park.

Anne and her mother preferred to remain in the background. In the weeks that had passed they had come closer to each other. Never before was Mrs. Sommerville known to confide in her children, but now she told Anne of her feelings at the absence of John. Yes, to her it was as if her child was dead, for she didn't know where he could be.

Ronald Sommerville knew little of what was going on between his wife and daughter. They had never mentioned John's name in his presence

and he was sure, very sure, that John's time was up and that victory would soon be in sight. Victory!—victory for orthodoxy, victory for tradition, victory for the generation to which Ronald Sommerville belonged.

Sometimes he felt anxious about the triumph that was not yet in sight. Age was beginning to tell on him and his health had suffered greatly on account of the strain of this constant rushing to and fro from Galford Park to London and back again. Ronald had worries too. All this was telling on him and he felt a queer feeling inside of him, in the region of his heart—sometimes even in his head. He had not consulted any doctors, for it was too trivial a matter to bother about. He believed in a stiff dose of good brandy, though sometimes even a couple of aspirins would put him right. He was determined to show his son the stuff a Sommerville was made of and he persevered day after day to climb to the top of the ladder of fame. He was sure the talk of his peerage, which had been featured prominently by every paper, would come to John's ears. That news could never have missed his son. It made Mr. Sommerville feel stronger and in his mind he envisaged the surrender of youth—a pathetic sight—and he chuckled to himself at the thought of it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BY Thursday John had almost finished writing his play. It only wanted a climax. That evening he met Phyllis and over dinner he read parts of it to her and she was thrilled. Here she was, a mere shopgirl on three-pound-ten a week and a playwright was reading his script to her.

"It's so beautiful, John," she said with emotion.

"Beautiful, my God," and he laughed so loudly that others in the restaurant turned and looked round.

"No, John, don't laugh at me. I know it isn't meant to be pretty, but it's so true to life, it's so sad, yes, it's beautiful."

"You are a cute kid," he said loudly for the first time. He was speaking out his heart.

By now John had finished the three pounds which Phyllis returned and when he dropped her that night, he had no money on him. Sometime during the evening Phyllis had ventured to ask

him whether there was anything she could do for him and he had assured her there was not. Even at the bus stand, she said : " John, take a pound with you. You can give it back to me."

" Oh, no ! I don't need it. I forgot to cash a cheque this morning."

" But you haven't even got a sixpence on you now."

" What does it matter ? I am going just around the corner to stay the night at Lady Fadingtree's and I shall be all right in the morning."

" Lady Fadingtree ? "

" Yes, she's a . . . my aunt."

The mention of a titled name made little Phyllis feel small. She looked absurd offering the loan of a pound to a young man with so many social connections. He could probably buy her out ten times and she explained away his shabby attire by saying to herself that all writers become like that when their heart and soul was in their work. She had seen John dressed immaculately that first time they met. Even now the clothes he wore, were Saville Row though dirt had got hold of them. Yet she didn't know what to make of him—for here he was wasting time on a stripling of a girl, when there were so many beautiful women in his own set. In the bus on her way home she wondered if he was still laughing at her.

Lady Fadingtree's was not so grand as it sounded. It was a little dump in Waterloo, where a woman's kindness made it possible for those who did not have even a farthing in their pockets to spend a night under a roof. The tramps of the hostel had often spoken of it as the last resort, though their sense of self-respect made them refrain from taking advantage of a kindness, which so many other men may be needing so badly. Even among tramps there was a sort of snobbery—and a man who spent a night at Lady Fadingtree's was considered *déclassé*. It was like the Oxford undergraduate who regarded the visitor from Edinburgh and Bristol as not quite alpha-double-plus.

To John it made little difference where he was. He walked that night to Waterloo and asked a policeman on duty where this place was. The policeman looked him over twice and John repeated his question: "Could you tell me where I can find Lady Fadingtree's?"

"Lady Fadingtree's? What can a young man like you want that for?"

"Well, officer, I want to put my body down to rest somewhere."

"Bad as that?" the bobby sympathetically asked.

"Yes, bad as that," John replied with perfect nonchalance.

"Out of work?"

"Yes, out of work, out of home."

"'Ere take," and he dipped his hand in his pocket and produced a shilling piece."

"No, thank you," John replied, "I didn't ask you for money."

The policeman was taken aback by John's sharp answer. "Sorry, pal," he said, "I didn't want to be sort of....well....I just couldn't see a young man....well, if you must know, it's the second on the right and, down the lane."

"Thank you." John said, and quickly disappeared into the night. A half hour later, the same officer saw this young man retracing his steps. He was walking in the direction of the Embankment and the staunch guardian of the law wondered what had happened.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

IN Phyllis's dress shop next day, she told the girls of the romance in her life. She had mentioned his name to one of them and the friend had told her that she had seen something in the papers about him. This piece of paper the friend brought to Phyllis—also the cutting on Mr. Sommerville declining his peerage.

Phyllis was excited and proud of her little hero. The father and son story had the right amount of "human interest." Perhaps Mr. Baldon was right after all. He certainly knew his two million readers. Phyllis was one of them, so were the other girls in the shop. Madame Bitz, who owned this smart gown shop and whose customers were from the Upper Ten, and included royalty from far and near, had flown to Paris for the day to take a special order from a princess who was getting married to a Polish Count and wanted her bridal dress made almost immediately. She had left the shop in charge of the girls whom she trusted, and she had arranged the appointments

so well that it was not necessary for her to be there in person. No one of any consequence came in that afternoon and the girls spent their time discussing John Sommerville, the biggest thing that had happened to any one of them. Phyllis then very proudly said : " I dined with him last night."

" Did you and what is he like ? "

" Very nice—except that he is broke, I am sure."

" Broke ? How could he be ? He is only pulling a fast one on you."

" No, I even offered to lend him a pound, but he wouldn't take it."

" Lend him a pound ? Nerve ! "

" But he didn't mind. He told me he was going to spend the night at his aunt's place and it would be all right."

" Aunt's—that's an old story."

" He's not like that—shut up, you cat." And they screamed with laughter as shop girls do.

" Who was his aunt ? " one of the girls asked.

" Titled, she was." Phyllis replied.

" Ooh ! You may be a lady one day. May be you'll come here and order your clothes. Fancy Madame having to come up to you and say:

" What can I do for you, mi lady'—". And they laughed all over again.

" No, I'll never be that," Phyllis coyly said.

" Never can tell. The aunt may take a fancy to you. What's her name?"

"Lady Fadingtree."

"Fadingtree?" and the other three girls looked at each other, and there was a grim silence.

"What's wrong?" Phyllis said. She was scared by their sudden silence.

"Nothing."

"Tell me what is wrong? Don't fool with me. I love him."

"Well..", one of them ventured, with the approval of the others, "she's titled all right and a very kind woman. But she's got no home except the one she keeps for tramps. You know— free bed. It's in Waterloo."

Phyllis stood there beside the counter, and her eyes were wet with tears. They trickled down her soft cheeks and she wiped them as they fell.

One of the girls came up and said: "Nothing to be ashamed of."

"I am not."

"You ought to be proud of him."

"I am."

"What are you crying for then?"

"I don't know," and she blubbed again, "I love him."

"I'd go and see him and take him out. It's a horrid place," someone suggested.

"I tell you what," another intervened, "let's put all our cash together and you can give it to him. He's sure to pay back."

"I am game," the third said, and they pooled

their resources and collected some five pounds. They changed these into pound notes and put them in an envelope for Phyllis.

“Thanks.” said, Phyllis and from her own purse she drew out three more pounds. “Will it be all right if I go now? I’d like to find him.”

“Sure, we’ll look after the place and Madame won’t come today.”

“Thanks so much.” Phyllis said. There was a new light in her eyes and she kissed each of them in turn. She got into her coat and ran across the street to catch a passing bus.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

JOHN had spent that night on the Embankment. He preferred it to Lady Fadingtree's. He had gone there prepared for the worst but this place had gone even beyond his expectations and what he saw looked too much like dead bodies that were moving about. They smelt like corpses. It was human flesh, rotting with hunger, with dirt, with disease. It was filth and the kindness of a single woman, however brave she was, could not clean it out. It was a sort of gradual death which John saw before him. The living dead—the most gruesome thing that man can ever experience. And there were numbers of them. They spat on the floor as on the parents who had given them birth. They spat on the civilization they lived in. They spat on that which other men called holy. They did not even believe in God. No salvation army, no rescue homes, no holy fathers could ever bring back life into these dead bodies. The church offered them food for their souls, but what they wanted was food for their bodies Their

empty bellies and their bowels and the muscles inside their stomachs groaned. They wanted food. To hell with the soul they said.

Did one expect men like these to hold up their hands to God? Did one expect them to obey the laws of man and nature? How could one expect anything from corpses that walked and spoke and swore at the name of God and man. Blasphemers all—disbelievers—they could see other men digging their graves.

John left Lady Fadingtree's but he had found the climax to his story. It was an ironical situation to be in, for he had found that which had kept him nights and now when he had found it, he had no bed to sleep on. That night he had pottered along the Embankment, walking incessantly because he felt cold and could not afford so much as a cup of hot tea. Twice he passed the coffee-stall near the bridge in the spacious shadow of the National Liberal Club, and twice he had looked wistfully at the warmth of the boiling cauldron. He had gone without a smoke and he had fought the craving within him. Now he could endure it no longer. From a passing cab someone had thrown a lighted stump and he jumped at it before it got trodden on and took it to his lips. Before he had drawn so much as a puff, a coarse voice from behind him shouted: "Drop that, you bloody fool,"

And John turned round, flushed with anger.

"Why the hell don't you ask for one?" the voice repeated, and from behind the coffee-stall someone threw a packet of Woodbines on the counter. "'Ere you are—pay when you can."

It was for John a new form of kindness. This hard-faced coffee-stall man knew no better.

"'Ere, you are," he said in his loud compelling voice, "'eres, a cup o'tea. Pay when you can."

John sat down at the counter. He felt like a thief amongst honest men. He did not venture to say a word. His accent would have gone against him. Under his arm was tucked a bundle of papers. He hung on to them. The cup of tea finished, he had a fag from the packet of five, lit it with a borrowed match, leant over the coarse looking coffee-stall owner and whispered something in his ear.

"That's orright brudder. That's orright. Come again. Always welcome."

"Thanks again," John said and paced the Embankment once more.

When Phyllis found Lady Fadingtree's the next evening she hesitated opposite the entrance for quite a while. What could she say? What had brought her there? Charity? That would ruin everything for the two of them. Love? No, that would be too possessive. She waited outside, looking at the men that came in and those that went out and she saw no difference between them. With each man she saw, she dreaded going inside.

At last she made up her mind. An old man was just going out. She ventured to ask him : " Tell me, did you see a young man come here yesterday? . . "

" They comes and they goes, ma'am. I can't tell you."

She persisted, described John's clothes, the possible time, the distinguishing marks on his face, his hair, his bundle of papers, when the old man replied : " Now you mention the papers, I seems to recollect a smart kind of fella coming, I says to myself, he ain't broke, he's a writer, come to see us over 'ere, to write a story may be, then I says to myself, who am I to blame a brudder, may be he's broke too, may be he's like us too."

" Where is he ? "

" He never came in ma'am. He sort of looked frightened and he turned away. My pal asked him where he was going to and he said 'it's the embankment for me.' So he went out into the cold."

" Thank you so much. Here you are." and she slipped a little money into the old man's hands.

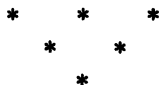
Phyllis was not yet beaten. She went to the Embankment late that night. She walked down the path, looking carefully at the men who slept on the benches. The evil-eyed looked round at her and thought she was a nice bit of flesh. What else could they think ? At the coffee-stall she made inquiries and the coarse voice behind the

counter said, as he always did, that he had seen nothing, heard nothing and he would say nothing. It took Phyllis a long time to explain to this old man who she was and why she made inquiries about him.

“ Well, ma’am if you are a friend of his, I’ll say he was here last night, and honest-to-God he was as flat as can be. I saw him pick up a lighted stump on the road and I says to him, lad, I says, here’s a fag for you. He’ll be here presently. May be it will be better if you come after a while.”

Phyllis knew she had won the old man over, She sat near the coffee-stall for two solid hours, anxiously waiting for John. It was nearing midnight and she had been on her feet since the evening. Even so she was determined to find him. Once again she walked up the lonesome promenade. It was dark except for a few lights that twinkled across the way.

But the night was clear and the figures that were huddled on the benches could be deciphered. Bench by bench she searched, stopping close by to see the faces, till she saw the man she loved, sleeping there in the cold, shivering even in his sleep. She had found her man.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

DAPHNE'S condition was far from satisfactory and she had to be removed to a nursing home. The doctor who attended on her was the same person she had visited in Harley Street. He was doing his utmost to save her child, for she had had a fall—a bad fall on the dance-floor, while dancing with some friend of Arthur's, who insisted on doing peculiar steps and pivoting constantly on one foot. Daphne had felt a griping pain in her stomach and the old remedy of opium, ice and rest did not do much good. There they stood—the doctor, nurses and Arthur, four or five days after the little accident, watching Daphne's condition getting worse and worse.

At last it was all over, and the child had to be sacrificed to save the mother's life. Daphne felt very sad that day. She had lost the only link that bound her to Arthur—it was what they had both lived for—and to bring it into this world they had made great sacrifices. But now their love was ended and Daphne knew it was the

beginning of the parting of the ways.

At first Arthur was sympathetic and sat beside her bed and read to her. Then he would disappear for a couple of days on business and no one knew where he went. For hours he would fumble with wireless apparatus, a new fad of his, and fiddle about with the electrical fittings. Whatever he did, it was obvious that the motive behind it was to find something to divert his attention from the woman who had given him nothing and with whose help he could not create anything. His absence from home got more and more marked and his mind became absorbed in other things.

No one else knew the cause of this drifting. The family decided that it was probably a difference of temperament. Others put it down to the eternal triangle. No one knew the real truth; only one other person besides them knew their secret and that was the Harley Street doctor.

One evening Arthur came back from dinner. He had been spending the evening with his friends. He found her in the living-room of their Chelsea flat reading some current fiction with the wireless still on.

"Hello, Daph," he said in his newly acquired hearty manner.

"Hello," she replied indifferently.

"Not gone out?"

"No."

"Peter said he'd ring you up tonight."

"What for?"

"He wants to take you out."

"Why?"

"Likes you, I suppose."

She did not answer and he added: "Go by all means. Let's both be reasonable and go our own ways."

"I am not stopping you."

"I know, darling, I know. But I want you to know it is all right with me too."

"There was no need to tell me that."

"Well, even so."

"Thanks, all the same."

"I think Peter wants you to join his party to Paris. He is short of a girl. Wants some one to partner him."

"There is no need to pimp for him."

"Don't be vulgar, darling. It doesn't suit you."

"Very well, mind your own business and don't try to sell your wife to the first buyer."

"Oh, come, come, don't let us get all worked up unnecessarily. I was only trying to make things pleasant for the two of us."

"Go ahead."

"Now listen, Daph, this is becoming serious. Listen, darling, I have been wanting to speak to you for quite a while. I have put it off till now, but I must tell you. After your little misfortune,

somehow, we have drifted. What bound us together was destroyed, and to be frank, I can't feel for you now as I once did. I confess I am being unkind, but there it is. You cannot make a man love you to order."

"I never asked you to love me."

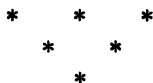
"I know, my sweet. that's where you are so reasonable—you understand it as well as I do."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. If and when you want to be seperated, you have only to ask for it. Till then we shall not get into each other's way and we'll go about together as if nothing had happened. We can remain friends—why not?"

"Yes, why not?" she said, asking the question more to herself than to Arthur.

There was no answer, for their child was destroyed and their love was still-born.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

GEOFFREY Durrant had made quite a name for himself out of *The Mad Symphony*. It had taken intellectual London by storm and the high-brows flocked to it every night and went back and told the low-brows they ought to see the play. That was the key-note of success on the London stage.

Durrant had left Oxford. He had done well in schools and had got a second in Modern Greats. This together with the Presidential chair of the Union and a play in the West End marked him out as a man of great promise. He received several offers of a job and Wardour Street agents were very keen on buying up the option on his next output of plays. But Durrant was having none of that. He had never played for safety in life and always liked to gamble at high stakes.

Day by day his fan mail increased. He got letters from all over London and the suburbs—from little women and little men who did not understand the mad streak in the heroine which was the basis of his play. These little people had

queued up for days on end, moving progressively on folding stools, afternoon after afternoon, passing their lunch hour in the open street with a packet of sandwiches. To some of these invisible correspondents Durrant would reply. To some who had asked for it, he would even send a cheap photograph of his, looking "dago-ish" in his cut-brim hat and with his cigarette hanging loosely from his lips. It was one of those pictures which photographers liked to call a "study".

Among his correspondence he also received letters and scripts from would-be playwrights and suggestions for his next play. They were worthless, most of them, though a few were sometimes quite useful. But Durrant made it a point to go through every line of his correspondence. It was still a novelty to him and he could afford the luxury of wasting time.

In this cosmopolitan jumble of papers he came across a full play. Three acts, three scenes. It was obviously written by someone who knew the requirements of the London theatre. There was only one snag in it. It contained a request that this play should be published anonymously as the writer could not disclose the name. The handwriting was definitely that of a woman. There was no mistake about it and she was quite emphatic that she would under no circumstances reveal her identity. She wrote that she would telephone to him a week later and ask him for the

answer. In the meanwhile she wanted Geoffrey to give it his consideration.

It was an intriguing affair. A woman playwright. A desperate plot. A gruesome setting. A perfect climax. Altogether a great play.

Geoffrey had taken a great liking to it. The only thing that worried him was the motive behind the refusal to reveal the identity. It might be a stolen manuscript and the consequences of publishing another person's work would be disastrous. So he decided to wait for her to make the next move.

In the meanwhile he had mentioned to his agent that he had received a play anonymously and that it was worth consideration.

"Anonymous?" his agent inquired.

"Yes, it's in a woman's handwriting. She says she has a very important reason for not divulging the identity."

"Lay off it. Lay off it. You'll get yourself into a tight scrape. You don't know whose play it may be. Then what are you going to do?"

"I realize all that," Durrant said, "but I'd like you to look at it."

"Don't waste your time, Durrant."

"What harm can it do you?"

"Every harm. I'd have to close up my business if it was discovered that I sold what I had no right to sell."

"But have a look at it."

"No—it's pointless."

"All right," said Durrant, quite resigned to the decision of a man of experience. The matter ended there.

The mysterious telephone call to which Durrant had anxiously looked forward, arrived exactly a week later.

"Hello, is that Mr. Geoffrey Durrant?" a woman's voice asked.

"Yes, speaking."

"I am the person who sent you a play entitled *Blood Is On My Hands*."

"Yes, yes."

"Well, what have you decided?"

"I read it through and I think it may have a chance, but to expect me to do it anonymously is out of the question. No one will even look at it."

"Oh!" said Phyllis, at the other end of the phone.

"So you must decide one way or the other."

"Just a moment, Mr. Durrant," and she turned round and repeated the gist of the conversation to John, who was in the telephone box next to her.

"Well?" said Durrant after a few seconds.

"I am afraid that is impossible, Mr. Durrant. You must believe me when I say I cannot divulge the name. I assure you that it is impossible for me to do that."

"Yes, yes, but how can I take a chance like

that? You may be perfectly on the level—but supposing this is someone else's script which has fallen in your hands—then what?"

"Don't you ever take a chance in life? You seem to make your characters play with big stakes. Your *Mad Symphony* is full of it. And you, who created it, won't take a chance?"

"Listen, I want you to be reasonable. I am talking to you because I'd like to help you if I could, but I am afraid you are asking me to do more than I can."

"Very well, Mr. Durrant, that is in your hands."

"It is not in my hands and I want to impress that upon you."

"However, let it be."

"What do I do with your manuscript? Where do I send it?"

"Keep it with you. It's of little use to us."

"Us?"

"Yes, there are more people than one whose fate depends on it. You have little idea what it is all about. But I can't tell you more. I have given my word of honour—though personally I would break my word."

"I am afraid it's bad luck—that's all."

"Good-bye." and the girl's voice seemed to fade away, fading with emotion.

Durrant shrugged his shoulders. What else could he do?

CHAPTER FORTY

ST. JOHN Caska's disappearance from London had baffled many of his friends. His inverted ego made it difficult for any one to penetrate his covert aloofness. He suddenly awoke one morning to find that his art was meaningless and that the life he led was superficial. His exotic models who sat with their naked bodies in front of him for hours on end, were cold and lifeless. They had a line, they had symmetrical figures, they were brilliantly decorative, but it was all on the surface, and his association with them had affected his art. He realized that morning when he picked up a lump of clay, that he himself was like it—cold, grey, lifeless. There was no colour in his life, and all the money he was making could not put it in. That morning he had run away, leaving no address, leaving no trace of him behind. He ran away from himself—from the man he had been for the last so many years, ever since fortune had smiled on him. It was to seek shelter in the arms of a woman—a woman he was yet to find, ordinary,

plain, but a woman. He no longer wanted those sylphlike forms with oval teeth and ripe bimba lips, or with slender waist and deep-set navel, or those who moved with measured steps beneath the burden of their thighs. He wanted something intensely feminine, intensely sincere, intensely human. He wanted to put his chin in the hollow of her shoulder and feel the heaving of her breasts. He wanted someone he could cuddle, on those lonesome nights when he turned restlessly from side to side under his cold sheets. He wanted a mother for those unborn playmates of his. He was looking for a very ordinary woman in fact.

Caska's was a reaction against the sophistication that bored him. He had lived too much among women who had been sterilized—mentally by God, by men physically. Their appendices had more than once been removed and their flesh was preserved not by nature but by morphine and a whole troupe of drugs. They were difficult to get at. Two inches of the Max Factor or Elizabeth Arden stood in the way. God knows what their faces looked like. They looked beautiful in beautiful clothes and their bodies smelt fresh with French perfume. But that was all. Inside, deep down there was nothing—and even the depths were shallow.

In the flight from himself he went to the wrong places. The cities of refuge which he picked

upon offered him little. Europe was like that—full of storm troops of “pooty” girls, battalions of hot jazz, and whole brigades of low rumba joints. Exotic women haunted him wherever he went. Exotic women who had been the bane of his life. Exotic, soul-less women.

Now he wanted something different. He was sick of all this. Yet he never found what he wanted, for he looked for it in the wrong places.

When he came back to London, the mood had passed and his desperation had much subsided. He settled down to work, though his heart was not in it—it was still roaming over the face of Europe.

The housekeeper greeted him with a stack of unforwarded letters that had accumulated in his absence and made an abortive effort to recollect the names of the people who had called. So that Caska never heard of John Sommerville.



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

AT the end of a week Durrant appeared at his agent's office. Under his arm was a bundle of papers. His hat was drawn well over his forehead. His coat-collar was turned up and he looked like a criminal that was avoiding the public eye. He did not use the lift that day. Slowly he mounted the steps. He was not at all the self-possessed man he had always been. On the contrary, he seemed somewhat shaky, and not quite sure of himself. There was something on his mind.

He was shown into the office. His literary agent had a small room to himself and on his table was a stack of new plays which it was his business to place. He was a very successful man and his judgment had on more occasions than one turned out to be correct. He had forecasted the success and failure of West-End performances with a precision that was almost uncanny and managers of theatres believed he had a sort of second sight.

Durrant entered the room. He removed his hat, but left his coat on.

“Geoffrey—or shall I still call you Mr. Durrant?” the agent said.

“Not at all. I am so glad you call me by my first name.”

“Well, what can I do for you, Geff?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t want me to read another play by an anonymous author, do you?”

“No, I want you to read that same play.”

“I have told you that is pointless.”

“Not now, because I am going to disclose the name of the author.”

“Very well. But why are you so interested in it?”

“Wouldn’t you be if you had written it yourself?”

“That’s different. Why didn’t you say you had another play up your sleeve? Come on, out with it.”

“Here it is,” John said, producing the papers from under his arm. “I didn’t think you’d be interested in another play from me so soon after the first one. Besides it is written in quite a different vein. Serious. Much more true to life.”

“*Blood Is On My Hands*,” the agent read on the cover page, “sounds good, Geoffrey, sounds very good.”

“Look at it, when you can spare a few moments.”

“I’ll look at it right now and tell you in a

moment" and hastily he scanned over the first few pages, while Durrant looked blankly on.

"My God, Geoffrey," the agent said after a while, "there's a fortune here for you, if it's as good as I think it is. You fool, why didn't you give me this first? Pity, pity," and he kept on reading it page by page, while Geoffrey Durrant restlessly paced the room.

"Sit down," the agent said, "sit down. Don't be so nervous."

"I am not," Geoffrey tried to say with assurance.

"Listen, I can tell you now, if that's on your mind, it will be on the West End before you have so much as gone home to change for your first night. If I could get a play like this every day, my God, I'd be in clover."

"I am glad you like it."

"Like it? You don't know what you are talking about. But why all this mysterious desire to hide your identity?"

"I thought the public wouldn't believe it came from the same person. Nor would you."

"Well, frankly, I wouldn't say it's anything on the lines of the *Mad Symphony*. That was all right in its own class. It pandered to the little set which doesn't really know its own mind and I can tell you now, you were rather lucky in your press. But this is in a class by itself. The curtains are perfect. It's life, my boy, that's what's so forceful about it. From what I have

read, every word of the dialogue has punch in it—a punch in every word—simple though it is. Leave me now and if I were you I'd go out and crack a bottle of fizz or rush off to Paris for a week-end."

"I'll leave you—but as for the rest—well...."

"Well, nothing. You just do as I tell you. Go away, you fool, you don't know a good play even though you can write one."

"I must say you are very encouraging."

"Honestly, Geoffrey, let me tell you as a friend, you will go very far. Now go. I don't want to see you again till the contract is ready. You'll leave it to me to settle the terms. You trust me, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"All right, boy, good luck. As for me, out of what I'll get, I'll go for a trip round the world and I will think of you all the time."

They laughed, though Geoffrey was finding it more and more difficult to enjoy the situation. He had done exactly what he was afraid the woman over the phone was doing. For all intents and purposes he had stolen another person's play.



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

MR. SOMMERVILLE had been ordered complete rest by his doctors. They had met in consultation at Galford Park and they were far from satisfied with his fatigued condition. There was little doubt that after a long period of comparative inertia, this sudden burst of hard work did not agree with Mr. Sommerville and age was beginning to tell on him.

For the last eighteen months, ever since John had left Oxford that Friday morning, he had constantly been rushing up and down the country, discussing matters of State with those in high places, and reading papers till the early hours of the morning. This, coupled with his disappointment at John's arrogance had beaten him. He felt it within him, though through sheer obstinacy, he would not give up the fight. Inwardly he had sworn to fight it out till he had so much as a breath of life and in all the material things of life he had succeeded. He had doubled his wealth. He had recently risen to a key

position in English politics and he held the destiny of great men in the palm of his hand. With his immense wealth and his newly acquired power he could do almost anything. There was only one thing he now wanted. It was the love of his children. But all his hopes were smashed to pieces. He saw the sacred family tree, which he had preserved all his life, ending abruptly and it hurt him that the name of Sommerville would no longer go on in the manner in which he had planned. Neither John nor Anne would breed the stud children he had expected from them—and he hated that Sommerville blood should mix with the riff-raff, with the Smith's and the Jones's as he put it.

Now he was compelled to lie low—for he had been ordered perfect rest and under no circumstances was he to have the slightest excitement. He was already showing symptoms which were not to be passed over lightly. He was complaining of pain in the region of the heart, and after an excess of exertion he felt an aching in his left arm. followed by a numb feeling and a tingling in the hand. He could not describe this feeling, which made diagnosis still more uncertain.

“Well, doctor, how do they find him?” asked Mrs. Sommerville, when the specialists from London had gone and the family doctor was alone in the room.

“I am afraid he has been overdoing things

lately. I have warned him more than once. But he seems to take little notice of what I say."

"I know, doctor, I know. What should I do?"

"The only thing you must insist on is perfect rest. The heart must have perfect rest and no excitement of any sort whatsoever."

"Yes, doctor."

"No excitement. You must let him have his own way in little things, but he must under no circumstances be allowed any exertion. Otherwise, Mrs. Sommerville...."

"Well?"

"To be quite frank with you, it may be fatal."

Mrs. Sommerville turned stone cold. She was beginning to realize the gravity of her husband's illness.

"You must be brave, Mrs. Sommerville," the doctor added, "I am not saying this to frighten you. It is as well you knew what his condition is."

"But all of a sudden?"

"It happens like that with advancing age."

"What is it?"

"They suspect it may be coronary thrombosis—in other words the clotting of the arteries and it is a sort of thing you can never be sure of. He may be all right for a long time and then....well....there it is."

"Anything critical? Immediately critical?"

"No, I shouldn't say critical. But he has to be watched—carefully watched."

"I am asking because....because....", and she could not say the words.

"You mean because of John."

"Yes, doctor."

"Well, if he could come and see his father, it would be very advisable. I have never said so before, Mrs. Sommerville, because it is none of my business, but inwardly he has felt John's absence more than he has shown. Inside of him—always bottled up, inside of him—and too proud to confess it."

"I know it, doctor. I have known it all the time."

"But you must not tell him you have even noticed it."

"I understand. But where can I find John? I have not the slightest idea where my child is. God only knows where he is. God alone, I trust, will look after him."

"Don't you know anyone who might know his whereabouts?"

"No doctor. He is more or less dead to us. Has been because Ronald wanted it that way. Ronald has never forgiven nor forgotten."

"Wouldn't the papers be able to help you? Or the B.B.C?"

"They may, but do you think it advisable?"

"Perhaps you are right."

"What should I do then?"

"I should wait, Mrs. Sommerville. Trust in

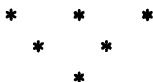
God—that's all you can do."

"Trust in God—it sounds easy, doctor. For a mother and a wife it is a different tale."

"I realize it—fully, and I admire your courage."

But Mrs. Sommerville had little courage left. She had exhausted herself, pining away for months on end. Still she closed her eyes, now wet with tears, and long after the doctor had gone, she heard herself say: "Trust in God....Trust in God.... Trust in God....".

It echoed in her ears, though it got fainter with each repetition—fainter and fainter till it faded away as she fell asleep on the chesterfield on which she was sitting. Trust in God, that was the doctor's prescription.



CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

WORD had been passed round the West End that Geoffrey Durrant had written another play and that great things were to be expected from this promising dramatist. The title had already taken London theatre-critics by storm and the advance booking was very heavy.

Posters were going up and Durrant's picture loomed large over the façades of the Plaza Theatre in Leicester Square. The cast which was to handle this was a star cast and altogether a much better, grander show than the *Mad Symphony* was promised. It was his agent who was responsible for the brilliance of the performance that was to take place, for managers trusted his judgment implicitly and what this experienced agent said, went.

Phyllis and John met again after they had seen notices of the new play by Geoffrey Durrant. At first they had merely been curious but now, when the name was given out, they found that it was their own play—or John's at any rate—

which Durrant's unscrupulousness made him appropriate for himself. It was a rude shock for John who had always put Geoffrey Durrant, sometime President of the Oxford Union, on a pedestal all by himself. Phyllis's attitude was more hostile—she said she would write to the papers and give out the truth. She wanted Durrant to be exposed.

John would have none of that. He preferred to take it lying down for he felt it was useless fighting against fate. When his best friend had let him down—unknowingly perhaps—there was an end to everything. Perhaps there was such a thing as a noble tradition and family honour and those who were not brought up in these surroundings broke out as Geoffrey had done. Still he was prepared to give Durrant the benefit of the doubt, though the odds were overwhelmingly against him.

Phyllis and John had met every day since she found him that night on the Embankment. She explained to John how she felt towards him. She had recently come into a little cash, left to her by her grandmother, to be given to her on her twenty-first and she wanted John to take some of that and live on it till something came his way and he could repay it. She told him how necessary it was that he should live a little decently, for success could never come to him while his mind was not at ease and while he lived on the streets from hand to mouth. It might bring with it disease and dis-

ablement, for he mixed with the muck and scum of life and he would find he had made a great sacrifice to no purpose.

She had for once convinced the man she loved and John accepted her kindness. He lived in a small attic room on a few shillings a week but at least it was clean and warm and the food he ate was nourishing and the cigarettes he smoked were not trodden upon.

Evening after evening when she had finished with her shop she would come round to John's room in Shepherd's Market and they would talk with the fire glowing on their faces. She was the inspiration and John's output of human-interest stories became prolific. He had collected together the sort of stuff Mr. Baldon and a dozen Mr. Baldons would be willing to buy. But his play, his *chef d'oeuvre* had disappointed him.

"He is a cad, I tell you," Phyllis said.

"No, Phyllis, don't say that. One never can tell."

"But John there is no question about it. Here is a man who told me he was afraid of publishing it anonymously because we may be swindlers and passing off someone else's play. And now what has he done? He has stooped to the same thing himself—and openly. He knows that we will not reveal the author's name. That's where it's so dirty. So damned dirty, John. Let me show him up."

"No, Phyllis, it's my play, and you must let me handle it in my way."

"But John, you cannot afford to be so generous—not in your present condition. There is very little between you and the streets again and even what little I can do may not save you for long."

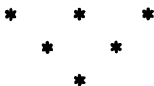
"Even so, darling. Let it pass. Let it at least appear on the stage. I want to see it. I want the thrill of seeing what I know and you know is my own work. That's all Phyllis. It's worth the sacrifice, don't you think?"

"All right, John. Sometimes I have a suspicion you are mad—sometimes I feel even sure."

"Idiot," he said, as he would to his sister Anne, and Phyllis came over and kissed him affectionately. Phyllis acquiesced, but in her own mind she was determined not to let Durrant get away with it. Secretly in the solitude of her own self she planned to make a scene on the first night. She thought nothing would shatter Durrant's fame so much as an exposure at the hour of his greatest triumph. Yes, that was the right way to treat such men, and if John got annoyed with her, he would in the end forgive her. With this idea in view she suggested on the morning of the play that they should go and see it—from the gods as they did once before.

That day John was feeling despondent. He had been disappointed by the one man on whom he would have pledged his life. Now he had lost faith

in himself and his judgment of human character. He had lost faith in humanity at large. Now he wondered whether all his sacrifice for youthful principles and all his adolescent rashness was not sheer stupidity after all. He still wondered. How could he be sure ?



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

PEN had now been at sea for over a year. From Bombay she went to Colombo and then to Hongkong and Shanghai. Her first disappointment was to find that both Buddha and Confucius, whom she had heard so much about and whom she had looked forward to seeing, were long since dead. Now there were merely images of the one in the temples and unintelligible writings of the other. She had expected so much from that mystic land. Poor Pen. She never understood why men overrated these "dead gods."

Tony was still fond of her. Her body satisfied his modest desires and what he liked most about her was that she was always willing. That was not all. She had studied every idiocyncrasy of his, and in her little way, she was like an affectionate cat. She had begun to realize that in return for seeing the world she too must do her bit and try to make her benefactor happy. Yes, "benefactor", that was the right word. It was that sort of gratitude she felt towards him.

They had now seen all the world together and were homeward bound via America—the land of Uncle Sam. Tony would bring out Lincoln's Gettysburg speech and as the ship docked in New York harbour, he would look at the Statue of Liberty and say to himself: "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth into this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal...." and Pen would feel so proud of Tony.

Pen was so flexible. She could turn from Chinese jade to American jake without turning so much as a hair. In fact she felt something that called her to this island of sky-scrappers, of G men and desperados, of Manhattan babies and film stars, of men and women who spoke English through a bunch of adenoids.

Everything around her was slick and snappy and they moved so fast, it was difficult for some time to keep pace with them. Hot dogs kept pace with pigbreeding and one did not know which came first—the chicken or the egg.

"Yessur," Pen once said, "it sur duz drive me crazy. I feel sort of gaga, then I get goofy and when I look on the ground on which I am standing, America slips under me."

"They are a great people," she wrote in one of her periodic letters to Daphne, "they turn out everything—from aeroplanes to babies, and if they

